

GROSVENOR ESSAY NO. 2



theology and the power of the image

The Doctrine Committee
of the Scottish Episcopal Church



Theology and the Power of the Image

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Preface

Like its predecessor, ‘Sketches towards a Theology of Science’ (Grosvenor Essay no. 1), this Essay is to be read as a series of sketches, which we hope cast light on its central theme from a variety of perspectives. It is written by different people coming to its subject from widely different backgrounds. Most of it is the work of members of the Doctrine Committee of the Scottish Episcopal Church, although we have also drawn on the expertise of other people: a parish priest with a background as an artist and teacher of art, and a Chaplain to Arts and Recreation in the Church of England. We would stress, as before, that this Essay does not represent any official position of the Church, but it is intended to provoke thought and discussion concerning the power of images in the life of the Church and of believers.

The Essay began in discussions at a number of meetings of the Committee which culminated in a residential conference. Not all of us would necessarily agree with everything that is said here, but at the same time the Doctrine Committee as a whole offers this as an Essay that is representative of the diversity and life of our Church. Its purpose is to encourage theological thinking in the context of *looking* and experiencing the power of the image in a changing world that is yet rooted, for us, in the ancient traditions of the Faith. It is intended both for the individual reader and also for

congregations, as they discuss changing patterns of worship in buildings inherited from earlier periods in the Church's life, and the relationship between the Church and such powerful purveyors of images as the popular cinema. We acknowledge that the visual is only one aspect of Christian experience, but it is nevertheless an ancient and powerful one.

This is merely a beginning. We have not interrupted the text with footnotes, but for those who wish to take their thinking in this area further there is a bibliography with a brief guide to each of its recommendations. All the material quoted is from texts in the bibliography. We hope that this Essay will be read both within the Church and by those beyond it: by people of other communions and faiths, and of none.

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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.

2. Consuming Images

We live in a society which is increasingly dominated by images. Our children are often much more visually perceptive than we are. In our world images are very powerful, and moving images more powerful still. The vast majority of images that we encounter in our daily lives are designed to persuade us of the allure of particular products and services: they are *consuming images*.

Muslims, Jews and Christians have a word for this distraction, and the sacrifices which the false promise of the image may require of us, and it is *idolatry*. The idols of ancient cultures, like those of the modern era, were quite literally *consuming* images. The idols of the Egyptians and the Canaanites depicted in the Hebrew Bible required the regular sacrificial burning of animals, artifacts, and even the offering of children. They were idols unworthy of worship, committing their worshippers to a distorted vision of reality as the most precious and vulnerable of God's creatures were offered up in sacrifice. The iconoclasm of Judaism and Islam, like the iconoclastic disputes of key periods in the history of the Christian Church, began in a response to this primordial power of idolatrous images to generate false descriptions of value, resulting in humans sacrificing their very humanity for the invented good of the idol. In the Ten Commandments graven images of God, or even of created things, are banned (Exodus 20:4) because they have the power to generate service to something which is not God. Therefore when people serve the creature before the creator they are devoting themselves to a lie and to the ruin of the beauty and order of the creation. The prophet Jeremiah describes this in words that anticipate the ecological crises of our own age:

Does the snow of Lebanon leave the crags of Sirion?

Do the mountain waters run dry, and the cold flowing streams?

But my people have forgotten me, they burn offerings to a delusion;

They have stumbled in their ways, in the ancient roads, and have gone into bypaths, not the highway,

Making their land a horror, a thing to be hissed at forever.

All who pass by it are horrified and shake their heads.

(Jeremiah 18:14-16)

Jeremiah's reflections on what Rowan Williams has described in his book *Lost Icons* as 'cultural bereavement' indicate how images can become delusions, or worse. This can then provoke in us that which is all too familiar in Christian history – the deliberate breaking and smashing of images: iconoclasm. The greatest iconoclastic moment in Scottish history was the Scottish Reformation, when thousands of images were burned or defaced throughout the churches, towns and villages of Scotland, as they were across much of Northern Europe. Most of our pre-reformation church buildings still show the marks of these acts of destruction, though in the case of pictorial images many were simply hidden under whitewash. The Reformers were protesting not simply about images but also about the corruptions of the late medieval Roman church, and what they saw as the idolatrous corruption of the faithful worship of God according to the command of scripture. Four centuries later some Reformed traditions continue to prohibit the use of images in worship, although the view of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicea (787 CE) has generally prevailed in Lutheran and Episcopal traditions. This Council was convened when an iconoclastic dispute threatened to disturb the peace of the Church. The Council agreed that it was possible to use images of Christ, the Trinity and the Saints and Angels in the adornment of the house of God and of individual homes, as means to the proper training of the senses in worship. Indeed, from its earliest days, the Church has incorporated images in its worship and practice, drawing on its biblical and Jewish roots in doing so.

The origins of theological reflection on the power of the image in the Christian and Jewish traditions are to be found in the Genesis stories, in which Adam and Eve are described as having been made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). Furthermore, the whole creation is described as pleasing to the Creator who 'saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good' (1:31). But the Fall of Adam and Eve brings about the marring of this original perfection. The whole history of the religion of Israel might then be seen as a succession of failed attempts to restore to humanity the original beauty of the image and likeness of God. The defining aesthetic

moment in this history was the building of the Temple of Solomon which itself soon became a site of idolatry.

The possibility of the redemption of the image arises for Christians not in the history of the Temple, or in Israel's covenant society, but in the Incarnation of Christ, whose true beauty, paradoxically, can be known only through the Crucifixion. The Christian vision of beauty is not like that of Plato, or that of the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, for it does not lie in the contemplation of the eternal forms through the training of the inner eye of the mind. Rather, Christians come to know true beauty through their encounter with the Incarnate God. The glory of God and of all his creation is revealed to Christians through God's self-revelation in Christ.

The *real presence* of this divine work of art – the 'art of God Incarnate' in Aidan Nichols' memorable phrase – makes possible the redemption of the image from the distortions occasioned by the Fall. This primordial, real presence enables Christians to encounter in their traditions, liturgies, icons, symbols and places of worship, the presence of truly redemptive images. Delight, joy and wonder accompany the transforming power of authentic encounters with the glory that is revealed in the redeeming events of Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension. At the same time, Christian culture becomes 'joyless, lustreless and humourless' (Karl Barth) when the Church seeks to suppress the sensual appreciation of God's glory. And there is also a joylessness in consumerism. Christians find that, apart from the revelation of the beauty of Christ incarnate and the redemptive power of the cross and resurrection, we fatally misread the power of images.

In Christian history, and also in the history of much Western art, the very possibility of artistic endeavour takes its rise from the real presence of Christ and the enactment of that real presence in the liturgies and the lives of the early churches. As the cultural critic George Steiner suggests, the liturgical re-enactment of this real presence in sacramental worship is, to a large degree, the cultural root of the extraordinary creativity and richness of European art and music from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. At the same time, since the Renaissance artistic expression has tended to become distinct from the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist; and its

transformative power, ever more markedly in recent times, has been diluted by the ubiquity of the consumerist images of marketing and advertising. The purveyors of the consuming image may be indeed the high priests of late modern Britain, their images powerful enough to enslave the consumer society; but those images cannot save us, or lead to the true liberty and flourishing of the children of God.

3. Visual Images in Science

The sciences have played a large part in shaping the thinking of contemporary Western society, so it should not surprise us that fresh insights into the importance of visual imagery in the modern age can come not only from art itself, but also from the sciences. For example, the sciences have told us many important things about the mechanisms and neural constraints of visual perception. Here, however, we take a different track, and remind ourselves of the immense power of images within the sciences.

To explore this we must first go back to the ‘scientific revolution’ of the seventeenth century, when many societies were founded to encourage scientific research. One of the earliest of these was the *Accademia dei Lincei* (Academy of the Lynxes). Founded by the Italian Federigo Cesi in 1603 (fifty-seven years before the Royal Society in Britain), the society was named after the lynx because of the animal’s reputed sharpness of vision. The Lynxes dedicated themselves to direct observation of the world, and they reported their work in vernacular Italian. The art historian David Freedberg points out the Lynxes’ logic: ‘Just as one could now appeal...to the clear evidence of the eyes, rather than to the testimony of ancient books and writers’, so now the language of observation was that of the common and everyday rather than the obscurity of the learned and classical languages of Latin and Greek. The most famous Lynx was Galileo Galilei, whose telescopic observations of sun spots and of the moons of Jupiter constitute decisive chapters in the birth of modern science.

Given this privileging of the visual by the pioneers of modern science, it is at first sight not surprising that scientists ever since have been amongst the most avid producers and users of visual images. But is it *so* obvious that science should be such an

overtly ‘visual’ affair? What, after all, do scientific images actually show? From Robert Hooke’s first drawing of cells in a piece of cork (1665) to William Smith’s map of the geological strata of the British Isles (1815); from Carl Anderson’s Nobel Prize winning cloud chamber photograph demonstrating the existence of the positron (1932 – see fig. 1), to the birth of stars in ‘evaporating gaseous globules’ revealed by the Hubble space telescope (1995) – scientific images depict realities which are strictly *invisible* to the naked eye. In fact, we need such images to *make present* (a real presence) these realities precisely because they are *absent* as far as direct sensory perception is concerned.

Interestingly, the brief explanation that always accompanies any scientific image is known as its ‘legend’. This is a happy choice of word, since it takes us back at least to Geoffrey Chaucer, the poet of *The Canterbury Tales* (c.1387), to whom it could mean simply a story or account. Lying behind every brief ‘figure caption’ is a story or a ‘legend’. The story tells of the instruments which scientists rely on, whether a simple hammer or a sophisticated telescope, and how they struggle to make their instruments functional. It tells of the ‘raw data’ generated by these instruments, which are often not visual in any obvious sense but merely clicks on a counter or readings on a dial, both of which may be tabulated as columns of numbers. It tells of the ‘bridge’ that links such data to the image, consisting of layers of hypothesis and theory.

The actors in this story – instruments and theoretical constructs – enable scientists to *transform* realms that are inaccessible to direct human perception, and to *represent* them as visual images. Taken literally, a scientist who points at the curved track on a cloud chamber photograph and says, ‘This is a positron’, is speaking patent nonsense. Literally there are merely blotches of ink on a piece of paper. These blobs of ink in turn are the images of droplets of water formed in a ‘cloud chamber’. From the fact that the trail of water droplets is curved, and knowing the speed of the particle and the size of the externally imposed magnetic field, the scientist concludes that the formation of the vapour trail was triggered by the passage of a particle with the mass of the electron but the opposite of its electrical charge: the first example of an ‘antiparticle’. Faced with this ‘legend’, all but the most pedantic purist will find it irresistible to use the shorthand, ‘This is a positron’. On the other hand, a viewer who does not have any appreciation of the legend (that is, the narrative context) of a

scientific image will either be openly skeptical – surely no-one can see subatomic particles – or else be tempted to fall into ‘idolatry’ and take the image far too literally, thinking that that is what such a particle ‘really looks like’. (Here, Plato’s instinctive reaction against art because of its potential to delude has some force: see further below, section 4.)

While the use of visual images has been widespread since the beginning of modern science, there have been outstanding exceptions. Perhaps the most striking example is the absence of pictures of any kind in Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859). But even here Darwin was capable of using his powerful prose to paint pictures in words. Take, for example, the beginning of the famous last paragraph of the book: ‘It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other....have all been produced by laws acting around us.’ It is hard to imagine any reader *not* conjuring up visual images at this point!

More interestingly there have always been scientists who are actively *against* images. One famous battle of scientific iconoclasm was fought over the formulation of quantum mechanics when the theory was created during the first quarter of the twentieth century. To begin with, Werner Heisenberg formulated the theory in terms of abstract arrays of numbers (which he soon discovered were what mathematicians called ‘matrices’). Later, Erwin Schrödinger taught us how to think of the quantum world in terms of ‘wave functions’ – the allusion to ‘waves’ powerfully connecting to our everyday visual experience. Both formulations gave the same (correct) prediction of the ‘hydrogen spectrum’ – that is, the colours of light emitted by hydrogen when it is heated up. Indeed, the two approaches were soon shown to be mathematically equivalent, though that did not stop the proponents arguing about the merits of their respective scientific styles. The crux of the argument is of central interest to us: it is to do with ‘visualizability’. The protagonists concerned expressed themselves as follows:

My theory was inspired by L. de Broglie....and by short but incomplete remarks by A. Einstein....No generic relation whatever with Heisenberg is known to me.

I knew of his theory of course, but felt discouraged not to say repelled, by the methods of the transcendental algebra, which appeared very difficult to me – and by the lack of visualizability [*Anschaulichkeit*]. (Schrödinger)

There can be no directly intuitive [*anschauliche*] geometric interpretation, because the motion of electrons cannot be described in terms of the familiar concepts of space and time....The more I reflect on the physical portion of Schrödinger's theory, the more disgusting I find it. What Schrödinger writes on the visualizability [*Anschaulichkeit*] of this theory...I consider trash.
(Heisenberg)

The perspectives of these two giants of quantum physics can hardly be more different!

Another iconoclastic episode concerns the study of the many subatomic particles that were soon discovered in the quantum world first charted by theorists such as Schrödinger and Heisenberg. The episode has been recently documented by the historian of science, Peter Galison. On the one side are those like Carl Anderson, who used cloud chambers (and the later, more powerful, 'bubble chambers') to capture visual images of the subatomic world. On the other side are the iconoclasts. They include the Nobel laureate Samuel C. C. Ting. His team announced the discovery of the *J* particle (which was instrumental in establishing the reality of quarks) not in the form of particle tracks, but as an austere graph: a plot of a number of a particular type of 'events' recorded by counters versus the energy of the subatomic particles the scientists 'collided' in their apparatus. Interestingly, this iconoclastic controversy was finally resolved when scientists learned how to construct hybrid instruments capable of generating visualizable tracks *and* columns of numbers to be plotted in graphs.

4. The Power of the Moving Image: Cinema

At the same time as the early quantum scientists were debating the problem of 'visualizability', the young film industry was developing the most powerful factory of images in modern culture. Primitive experiments with devices that could present images in sequence began in Europe as early as the late eighteenth century, continuing

throughout the nineteenth century, until the 1890s. This decade saw both Edison's patented invention of the Kinetoscope and the Lumière brothers' first projection of films to a paying audience. The medium rapidly gained technical sophistication and economic success, and by the 1920s 'picture palaces' around the world were often as popular and opulent as opera houses and theatres, and the cinema had staked its claim to be considered as a major art form. Hollywood established a dominating position in the years after the First World War, taking the lead in terms of both artistic direction and technical innovation. Since then, cinema around the world has continued to develop in response to differing cultures and markets.

Popular cinema today is almost exclusively composed of imaginative narratives of one kind or another (rather than, say, abstract animations, educational presentations or travelogues). Typically a film introduces characters and information gradually by a process of presenting new material and consolidating what the viewer knows already. Soon all the viewer needs are a few quick reference points for a whole narrative of the history of the character to be recalled so that the plot can continue without the need for a more lengthy explanation. For example, in a particularly dramatic scene in *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), one character burns acid into the hand of another. Enduring the pain is understood as a liberating ritual. Subsequently, at various points in the film, the camera returns to the scar, which becomes a powerful image that reminds the viewer of this brief but complex incident encapsulating many of the film's key themes or moods: intensity, obsession, violence and self-deception. Again, typically, such a film also addresses a certain set of problematics and works towards a resolution. In *Fight Club*, the problematics addressed are perhaps best described as the perception of contemporary alienation and loss of feeling. The resolution is finally worked out with some insightful, if very dark, reflections on human connections and the construction of masculinity.

There are many issues on which we could focus regarding the power of the image in the cinema, and especially in respect of the symbols, narratives and practices we might call 'religious'. Yet it seems that Plato's objection to the artists – that what they presented was in some sense a sham, an illusion with the power to delude us – remains a key one in the still 'Christian' context of Eurocentric cultures. There is, of

course, a distinction between ‘realism’ and the representation of truth. But cinema and the filmic image are particularly adept at a certain sort of realism. Film narratives are always imaginative constructs but, while they can be presented in terms of deliberate make-believe, modern technical resources and special effects have the capacity to mimic reality in ways that can be highly confusing.

Consider, for example the work of the director Tim Burton in films like *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *Sleepy Hollow* (1999). Burton makes little attempt to make his films appear realistic and happily ushers us into the realm of fairytale. In contrast a relatively routine thriller like Tony Scott’s successful *Enemy of the State* (1999) is set within a framework that self-consciously attempts to be realistic even when the events portrayed are unlikely or appear in unlikely combinations – for example our hero always escapes serious injury or death no matter how violent the circumstances! Yet a film like Tim Burton’s *Edward Scissorhands* can be read in terms of the problematics of human experience – the extreme difficulties we have in accommodating various kinds of experience. *Enemy of the State*, by contrast, arguably distracts us from the real complexity of the issues. That is to say, it is possible that people who are trying to raise awareness of the political debate on which the film appears to hinge – the need for public surveillance versus the right to privacy – may argue that Scott uses a realistic style to appeal to largely paranoid fears and fantasies about modern technology and political corruption.

Interestingly, ‘realism’ can also be problematic in scientific documentaries. The recent series of television programmes *Walking with Dinosaurs* showed ‘virtual reality’ animals in reconstructed Jurassic scenes. The programmes annoyed at least some scientists, who considered the high degree of realism grossly misleading: it hides the very large amount of educated guesswork involved, thereby investing the science of palaeontology with a degree of certainty that it will never have. (Plato would probably have sided with these scientists!)

Of course, as film critics will be quick to point out, realism is only very approximately ‘realistic’ anyway. Filmic images are fraught with ambivalence. Creating and reading a film are highly complex activities which juggle realism and more abstract

or symbolic/ mythic forms of representation with great subtlety within the gendered, ethnic, political and economic contexts of both film-makers and film-goers. Consider Mel Gibson's hugely successful film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). In terms of the analysis suggested above, the narrative of the film proceeds by means of a sequential plot line following a cinematic realism which focuses upon the last twelve hours of Jesus' life. The film pitches towards an 'historical accuracy' by its use of Latin, Hebrew and Aramaic dialogue, and seems to gesture towards some sort of 'real time' techniques, particularly in its focus on Jesus' actual pain and suffering. Yet claims to be significantly 'realistic', in so far as this realism might be thought to contribute to the film's character as a powerful vehicle for religious truth, cannot be easily upheld. The narrative of the film is based upon biblical narratives and spiritual reflection, both of whose concerns are arguably primarily theological rather than 'realistic'. The demonic figure who shadows Jesus' last hours, as well as flashbacks to earlier times in his life, clearly place this film in the mainstream popular category of imaginative narrative. Even the 'real' time of Jesus' suffering is untypical in terms of the film's narrative pace as a whole. The focus upon the scourging and crucifixion substantially slows the pace down and at the same time increases the emotional density of specific sequences. Yet, finally, the set of images that constitutes this film exercises a powerful effect upon the viewer.

But perhaps this is especially so for those who read the film's symbolism in the context of the solemn rhythm of the 'real presence' of a liturgical performance, invoking, for example, the Roman Catholic tradition of the Stations of the Cross which form the basis of traditional Good Friday observance. For the Roman Catholic Mel Gibson, the emotional and aesthetic appeal of liturgical practice is clearly both deep and profound, and the underlying pattern of the film's narrative resonates on a deeper level than that which could be reached by a 'mere account' of the events, even if this could be reconstructed. Yet the contextual ambiguity of this set of images remains. This is also a film whose politically conservative narrative – which has about it little of the passion of the social gospel of liberation theologians, for example – has been produced and sponsored by the wealth of Gibson himself as an astute and powerful player within the Hollywood film industry. The film is in tune with the most conservative theologies of

atonement, and the resolution towards which it moves arguably seems more to do with generating penitence in a largely emotional rather than a prophetic sense.

The Passion of the Christ is not, of course, the first film to take up the challenge of representing Jesus on the screen. The capacity of the cinema to mimic reality while telling a story is undoubtedly part of the reason why so many attempts have been made within this medium to ‘bring the story to life’. Yet it is probably true to say that the most effective representations of the story of Jesus are not attempts to recreate ‘realistically’ first century Palestine under Roman rule. This leads us to an important conclusion: that the power of images rests not exclusively in their representation of reality, but in their ability to convey ideas. They achieve this through their telling stories. Interestingly, static as well as moving images have this ability.

5. Image and Narrative

5.1: Images, stories and meaning

Just as information is classically generated (as we have seen in our consideration of visual images in science) through *observation*, so meaning is classically generated by *narration*: that is, by stories and their images, which set observations within a narrative framework. Stories are themselves generated and passed down by communities which seek to preserve and communicate meaningful information, which is thought to be normative for life. The relation between images and the narratives of stories is complex, but that such a relationship certainly exists is illustrated by the celebrated saying, that ‘every picture tells a story’.

Sometimes the story told by a picture is fairly unambiguous. For example, a biblical image might immediately link the viewer of a work of art to an already familiar narrative; and that viewer, may, in consequence, readily deduce from the picture the meaning which it is attempting to convey or suggest. But not all works of art depict familiar stories which we can be expected to recognize. Do such pictures still tell stories, and hence convey meaning? The answer to that question is surely ‘Yes’, but the stories they tell, and the meanings they convey, are perhaps less obvious, and they ask

that their viewer spend time interpreting the picture and ‘making up’ the story. Even if the painting does not represent an incident in a known and established narrative, it may still contain an implied narrative, which the viewer is left to deduce or construct.

5.2: Implied narratives: the case of Vermeer

As an example of a painter whose works require interpretation in this way, consider the Dutch master Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675). His pictures are for the most part ‘genre paintings’, depictions of scenes from everyday life. They typically show calm domestic interiors in which one, two, or occasionally more figures sit or stand engaged in mundane acts such as reading, writing or playing a musical instrument. They tell no obvious stories; yet, as one critic has claimed, Vermeer’s paintings ‘elicit...a response from the viewer’. In other words, viewers of these paintings are invited *into* them, and further invited to devise a narrative that fits and ‘explains’ them.

As a typical example of Vermeer’s art, consider his painting ‘Lady writing a letter, with her maid’ (fig. 2). Close observation of this painting allows us to glean a good deal of information about the scene it depicts. We are ushered into a light and airy room with a black-and-white tiled floor. Light streams through a partially-curtained, leaded window on the left. A woman sits at a table, writing, whilst another woman stands behind her, staring out of the window. A large picture hangs on the rear wall, showing some figures in a woodland setting. (It depicts the infant Moses being found by Pharaoh’s daughter, and she and the baby are directly above the writer’s head, suggesting, perhaps, some parallel between her situation and theirs.) In the foreground there is a chair, and on the floor beside it a scrunched-up piece of paper: clearly a letter, since a red wax seal has been torn from it and lies beside it on the floor. Now, these observations, whilst they describe the scene well enough, do not tell us anything very much regarding what it is about: neither do they tell us about the story behind the scene. What that story might be is by no means immediately evident – at least, it is not unambiguously expressed through the observations we can make of this picture. But human beings seldom remain satisfied with uninterpreted information. We restlessly seek also the meaning, or meanings, which lie behind it. Faced with a painting such as this we soon begin to make up a story, creating a narrative in which to set the scene we

are observing, and thereby reading meanings into it. Even if there is no explicit narrative driving the elements in this scene, there is still an implied one. What might it be? What narrative might make sense of the details we have observed?

Critics have made a number of suggestions in answer to this question. For example, perhaps the lady has been agitated by the letter which has been thrown onto the floor, but (as the painting in the background suggests) she is composing her reply in a calmer frame of mind, buttressed by her faith that divine providence will control her destiny (as it did that of Moses). Perhaps the Moses painting allows us to deduce further that the writer hopes that the person for whom the letter is intended will be cared for and protected, as Moses was. The role played by the maid has also been the subject of speculation: perhaps she is waiting to take a reply back to the person who sent the original letter; or maybe she is looking through the window at the messenger, having some amorous interest of her own. All these suggestions have been made by Vermeer scholars in their attempts to narrate the ‘story’ of the picture.

5.3: The power of the image for religious communities

What does all this suggest in terms of the theological relevance of visual images? We have observed that communities, including religious communities and churches, use stories to communicate and preserve their understandings of reality, ascribing particular meanings and significances to it. These stories can be variously interpreted, and that is where *traditions* come in: by setting formal or doctrinal parameters around what are deemed to be acceptable interpretations, some cohesion in the thinking of the community may be maintained. However, when images are used to represent or to gloss stories of this kind, such parameters are far more difficult to set. Control over the implied narratives which such images may contain is far more difficult to maintain: indeed the power of the image may even be such as to defeat and overcome the established interpretations of the narratives. At the same time, it is only through the relaxing of such interpretative control that the community of the faithful can breathe fresh life into its stories, thereby renewing itself and remaining relevant to the wider context in which it is placed. Since pictures are a way of achieving this, the power of the image can be a vital, though sometimes two-edged, tool for the development of

theological thinking. To be sure, the development of any theological tradition through the use of images involves risks. But at the same time, the ability of images to speak directly to people means that they have the potential to move their viewers far more than any tidy doctrinal system can do.

This leads us to a consideration of some of the ways in which Christ has been represented in art through the centuries. We find that frequently such representations are used to challenge the viewer, and to carry forward the theological thinking of the Christian community. Some examples of this are described in the next section.

6. Images from the Life of Christ

6.1: The Workshop of Robert Campin – ‘Madonna and Child Before a Firescreen’

The iconographic representation of sex in art is centered on the depiction of the body: the iconographic representation of sexuality is rendered in personality, seen in the form of its face and its expressions. In Western art the exposure of the Virgin’s breasts or of the infant Christ’s genitalia bears no trace of scandal or blasphemy: generally images of the Virgin and Child are located in domesticity and the natural processes of child rearing. The ‘Madonna and Child Before a Firescreen’ (1515 – fig. 3) from the workshop of the Netherlandish artist Robert Campin, place the mother and child within a well-appointed Renaissance home in Flanders where decorative furnishings, expensive clothing and a view over a northern city create a comfortable and relaxed environment.

The mother has been reading and has put her book aside to attend to her hungry child. She is untroubled: her hair is down indicating that she is not expecting company and is not about to leave the house. The naked child is at ease, and a sense of warmth from the drapery and from the flames of the fire suffuse the scene with comfort and serenity. The atmosphere is enhanced by the firescreen itself which forms a halo for both mother and child. Furthermore, it is a projection from the heat of the fire, and as its form is circular, with a few flames extending beyond the edge, it might be seen as an icon of the sun. This invariably male symbol creates a scene of the Holy Family in

which the 'Father', as shield and protector, radiates divinely behind the mother and child. The Mother's eyes are concentrated on her infant. He is the centre of her attention, the centre of her world. Partly concealed in the triangle formed by her hand and the crook of his knee, the child's genitalia are just visible – a symbolic image of the life force. Their placing and depiction in this way has echoes of the life that began in a cave in Bethlehem and that ended in a cave near Jerusalem.

The child's hand on his knee is a small mirror image of his mother's below, which, while being supportive, also intimates a role in cleansing and nurturing, and indicates the role he will assume in the future. The child's head is linked to the mother's exposed breast, setting up an alpha and omega resonance. As she pours out herself to nourish him so he, later, will pour himself out for the salvation of the world. As her fingers offer the nipple to feed the child, so the child opens his hand to accept a future nail that will enable us to feed upon him. The Eucharistic symbolism of 'take eat, this is my body' is indicated by images of the Word (the open book) and the Sacrament (the chalice) that flank the pair.

There is nothing grotesque, unseemly or lustful in this image. The artist has taken care to avoid the monstrous or the sexually explicit, and it is naturalness, domesticity and humanity that are exhibited. In other works of art concerned with the Mother and Child, the occasional depictions of the infant touching his genitalia similarly suggest the normality of his life and reflect the notion of the contented child/God among us. Touching genitalia may be a typically childish gesture, one of comfort and security, but here it may also bear a symbolic reference to the Circumcision, which was the first shedding of Christ's blood from the very place often identified with original sin, and foreshadowing the second shedding of his blood on the cross.

In the single frame of the image painters often merge different narrative moments, thus conflating separate episodes and linking in one moment two distinct events. Images of the birth narratives are thus linked to the Passion. Whatever fears these paintings may generate today by virtue of their explicit portrayal of the body, it is clear that they contain no expression of mere sexuality. Images of the naked Christ

relate to his incarnate manhood and humanity, his identity with us as gendered human beings.

6.2: Matthias Grünewald (c.1460-1528) – The Isenheim Altarpiece

No Italian artist could have conceived of a representation of the crucifixion in the terms employed by the German painter Grünewald in the Isenheim Altarpiece of 1515 (fig. 4). This crucifixion scene extends beyond the terms of tragedy and grief to the sheer brutality and horror of this form of tortured death. Before this painting almost all scenes of crucifixion had manifested suffering in the attitudes, poses and expressions of the figures around the base of the cross. In the art of the Italian Renaissance the body of Christ on the cross is idealized. The brutality of the marks of the nails, the pierced side and the blood from the crown of thorns was moderated, and a sanitized, ideal body was substituted for the reality of a body brutalized by scourging and tortured by nails driven through the flesh.

Grünewald's unmistakable message of emotional intensity and terrible realism was more in tune with the theology of the Northern Renaissance, in which St. Bridget of Sweden's 'Revelations' was one of the most popular devotional texts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Northern Christianity was more austere than that of the warm South, and St. Bridget urged her readers to concentrate on Christ's sufferings and on their own human condition.

The Isenheim Altarpiece is a complicated structure containing four layers of painted surfaces with two sets of wings enclosing the formal Altarpiece on which a deeply scourged Christ hangs in death. The fingers arched out in agony, the ripped flesh and the colour of the body based on bruising and bloodlessness, offer a horrific presentation of the event that had not previously been shown in this way. Perhaps not until the screening of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was this intensity of torture to be seen again. But it is probable that Grünewald, in line with St. Bridget, did not intend this to be a realistic image of the crucifixion, but rather a meditation on the most frightful aspects of Christ's sufferings. This altarpiece was painted for a hospital, and was intended to assist suffering invalids to know something of Christ's closeness to

them. The theological significance of this is stressed by the figure of St. John the Baptist on the right hand side, whose stabbing finger indicates to the viewer the cost of Christ's love, while below the cross stands the sacrificial lamb.

This is a crucifixion of sombre, livid colour, creating an eerie, menacing light against a backdrop of apocalyptic blankness. There is a haunted quality to the savage imagery that echoes the expressive violence of the Romanesque period. The ghastly wounds, the agonized hands and feet and tortured head, place this image at a polar opposite to the elegiac serenity of the High Renaissance in Italy which was, at the same time, entering its final stages in Rome.

6.3: Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) – ‘The Yellow Christ’

When Gauguin first visited Brittany in 1886 he was already moving away from the Impressionists' concerns with the effect of light on colour and beginning to explore the symbolic potential of shape and colour that would become a universal language in Modernist art. His ideas of a primitive society, away from the bourgeois social world which he found so stifling in Paris, were located in a world of rudimentary simplicity and elemental truth where, he felt, an artist's personality could develop freely and find the form of expression best suited to it. The Breton culture, with its unique language, customs, and distinctive dress, had an immediate appeal for him.

The central image of ‘The Yellow Christ’ (1889) was not invented but redeveloped and revisioned from a crucifix in the Chapel of Tremalo near Pont Aven. The simple, rustic wooden carving, produced locally, had yellowed with age and smoke and stood out boldly from the whitewashed walls of the chapel, an example of the strong, elemental devotion in the lives of the local Breton farm workers and fishermen. The yellow used in the figure of Christ was regarded as scandalous, but Gauguin was never merely interested in heightened colour as a means of expression. ‘The Yellow Christ’ is a powerful symbol which reflects the faith of the Breton people, and its colour links directly to the countryside in which they live and worship. The living faith of these people provoked Gauguin to set them in a scene in which they are at once worshippers at a crucifix and witness to the Crucifixion. The yellow pours down the cross, flooding

out into the landscape, and filling the farm land and the lives of its people. The ochre colours are part of the figures, especially of a woman in a sackcloth apron, whose terracotta relates her at once to the land, the season and the figure of Christ itself. The faded autumnal colouring of the Christ might be seen as an expression of the continuing care for all creation that God promises to us. This is, indeed, a Christ for all seasons. Perhaps an early example of what has since become known as Green Theology, this is a Christ who embraces not just people, but the whole environment in which we live.

6.4: Max Ernst (1891-1976) – ‘The Madonna Chastising the Christ Child’

Surrealism was essentially a literary movement (even in painting), subjective, Marxist, and aimed at discrediting bourgeois ideology in art. The whole tendency of the movement was negative and destructive in its attempts to disturb the barriers between the conscious reality of life and the unconsciousness of the dream world, and to merge them into a new super-realism. Every genuine psychic experience is acutely personal and therefore individual and private. Thus the bafflingly improbable but emotionally convincing situation presented in Ernst’s ‘Spanking Madonna’ of (date?) (fig. 5) is a jumble of sexual precocity, false innocence, sadism and blasphemy.

The need to question, the desire to provoke the viewer by altering realities and perceptions, and the attempt to upset established relations, is a method of forcing a fresh definition of exactly what it is we are looking at.

6.5: Roger Wagner – ‘Menorah’

Painted in 1993, Wagner’s ‘Menorah’ (fig. 6) is a contemporary painting rendering the crucifixion in an unorthodox manner. Set against an industrialized background, the painting reveals several strands of ‘revisioning’ that mark the post-modernist period. The background structures, based on the Power Station at Didcot, near Oxford, symbolize an industrial movement, already dated, that has turned the environment into a wasteland, but yet from which we have derived power and energy and other industrial benefits. The cooling towers of the power station are structured to form a Menorah – the Jewish seven-branched candlestick. We are reminded that Jesus

was a Jew, and that his ‘modernizing’ agenda was denied and condemned by the people he sought to save. The onlookers in the painting are dressed in Hasidic clothes, allowing the smoke and industrial landscape to function as echoes of Belsen or Dachau. In their postures these figures seem to reflect the desolate, inconsolable grief of the Jewish people caught up in the Holocaust. The disposition of the figures is based on a photograph taken on one of the Crimean battlefields. Everything focuses on the abandonment of Jesus on the cross. The painting then exerts a pull forward through the events of history without losing the Jewish context of the scene. ‘Surely he has borne our infirmities’ (Isaiah 53:4) – the suffering God identifies with all human suffering, Jew and Gentile alike, even to the ravages of Cambodia, Rwanda and the continuing tragedy of the Middle East. The references to war and industrialization indicate the artist’s desire to promote a politics of transcendence alongside God’s promised presence through adversity and suffering.

7. Image and Liturgy or ‘The Look of the Liturgy’

In the Church’s celebration of the liturgy we realize most acutely in our own lives the balance between the God who is ‘other’ and the God who is present and near us in the things which we can see and touch and smell. As we have been reflecting on the necessary, risky power of the image, the liturgical context of images in the Church has already been mentioned more than once. This section considers in more detail the importance which attaches to how the liturgy *looks* as it is celebrated, for the Eucharistic liturgy is just as much seen as heard. It is as much about the visual as the audible, and what people see and *how* they see it during the course of the liturgy are of profound importance. For example, it is one kind of experience to see the host elevated by the priest far away standing in front of the altar, back to the worshipper: it is quite another to see the same action from close at hand with the priest facing the worshipper over a centrally-placed altar. They are, quite simply, different images. What is seen is the same liturgical action at the same point in the liturgy, but *how* it is seen is different and so how it might be understood is going to be different also. Again, it is one thing to see a celebrant in full Eucharistic vestments, another to see the priest in a lounge suit, or jeans and a tee shirt. In both cases, of course, some kind of a uniform is being worn and

there is a shared conviction that appearances matter a great deal, but the significance of what is seen is going to be, and is intended to be, very different. Moreover, it is not just what is seen in celebration and action of the liturgy itself – it is, just as importantly, what the setting of the liturgy looks like in terms of the building, works of art, space, colour and perhaps even the smell of incense. We know how important such things are to our sense of what the liturgy is all about, if only because when significant changes in such things are proposed very strong feelings can be evoked and conflict generated. It is, therefore, possible to argue that how the liturgy looks is a more visceral experience for most people than which particular rite is used. People often accept a new liturgy, at least in part, because the way it looks reassures them that no major change in the meaning is being imposed upon them. Whether that is an entirely accurate perception on their part is, of course, another matter – but it speaks strongly for the power of image and the way in which things look.

How the liturgy looks, then, is closely related to what it might mean – more intimately, perhaps, than are the words of the rite themselves. In particular it is closely related to what sort of meaning is being commended by those whom the Church makes responsible for the presentation and celebration of the liturgy. Anyone who has lived through the changes in the Roman Catholic liturgy since the 1950s will have a very clear understanding of this point – the revolution in the look of the liturgy was intended to express and to commend to the faithful a renewed understanding of certain aspects of what the celebration meant. To take a particular example from an Episcopal church in central Glasgow, the celebration of the modern liturgy in a new space created near the font at the back of a very large church building during which people sit in a semi-circle in front of a free-standing table, with the priest sitting among them for the entire liturgy of the Word until the Peace, is deliberately intended by the ordained leadership to offer the congregation a more intimate experience of Communion than is possible at the more traditional Sung Eucharist on Sunday morning.

Thus, *one way of beginning to explore the power of the image in the context of the liturgy is to consider what importance attaches to how the liturgy looks as it is celebrated.* And one way of exploring the importance of how the liturgy looks in performance, is to explore what might be called the visuals of reverence and the visuals

of familiarity. The terms ‘reverence’ and ‘familiarity’ stand for two fundamental ways of experiencing divine presence, and the liturgy is about nothing if it not about divine presence. One could use instead the more familiar theological terms ‘transcendence’ and ‘immanence’, but these hallowed words are far from the ordinary perceptions of liturgy with which we began this section, whereas the chosen terms seem to relate to major concerns which ordinary worshippers have in understanding the liturgy as the mediation of divine presence to them. Underlying the whole discussion is the sense of ‘real presence’, and so the two terms – reverence and familiarity – should not be opposed to one another but should be allowed to inform and complement one another.

Many, if not most, of the churches of the Scottish Episcopal Church are nineteenth century gothic revival structures, often with soaring pointed arches and far-away altars. The whole thrust and purpose of such buildings is upwards and beyond, suggesting reverence as the appropriate stance before the God whose being is beyond our grasp, infinitely mysterious and awe-inspiring. Liturgies celebrated in line with such architecture are likely to reinforce that message very strongly indeed – the altar fixed against the east wall, the celebrant facing east, together with the entire congregation, during the Eucharistic prayer. Indeed, the whole Eucharistic action proper takes place ‘at a distance’ from the main body of the congregation. Visibility may even be further reduced by the use of incense. However, as soon as such pointers towards reverence are made, counter-balancing pointers towards familiarity are forced upon us by some of these very settings. To begin with, many of these gothic churches are, in fact, quite small – many have pointed windows but not pointed arches. Many present an unobstructed view from the west end to the east end, so that the altar, even if still firmly fixed against the wall, is yet highly visible and the focal point of the whole structure. One might describe such buildings as small, jewel-like structures, and in them the visuals of reverence are already blended with the visuals of familiarity. Nothing is very far away from the congregation.

Unease with the strong emphasis on reverence at a distance commended by such buildings is not an entirely contemporary phenomenon. In one of the greatest of these nineteenth century gothic buildings in the Scottish Episcopal Church, St. Mary’s Cathedral in Edinburgh (which is, in fact, the largest post-Reformation church building

in Scotland), there hangs a painting called *The Presence* (fig. 7). It depicts a celebration of the Eucharist in a blaze of light at the distant high altar. In the dark foreground of the picture we see a woman kneeling at the foot of a pillar, alone, save for the presence of Christ beside her, his hand moving towards her in blessing. In this painting we find combined the visuals of reverence and the visuals of familiarity. Perhaps there is a critique of the former, or simply a reminder that there is more than a ‘gothic’ liturgical way of encountering the real presence of Christ. However that may be, this picture suggests a need to counteract the thrust of the liturgical setting in the interests of mediating the divine presence in more intimate, familiar settings.

Most modern liturgical arrangements, especially in the re-ordering of the kind of buildings we have been discussing, tend towards the visuals of familiarity. Although sometimes the results could not be described as architecturally felicitous, nonetheless powerful messages are being sent about how the liturgy is best approached and understood. Altars in central spaces, sometimes with a distant high altar looking distinctly disused, strongly assert that God is near, in the middle of the people, and not ‘up there’, beyond our grasp. Sermons delivered from lecterns on the same level as the congregation, or by a preacher walking up and down the nave, and not from elevated pulpits, make a similar point. People receiving Holy Communion standing, or from one another, rather than kneeling at the altar rail, *looks* and feels different.

Finally, as we reflect upon the power of changing images, it may be worth reflecting not only upon how the liturgy looks, and upon how the setting is made to look, but also upon how the congregation itself looks! Instead of wearing ‘Sunday best’ clothes, people now often ‘dress down’ for Sunday worship: reverence is replaced by intimacy and familiarity, indicative, perhaps, of a changed sense of our relationship with God, and even of how the deity is perceived and ‘imaged’.

8. The Monymusk reliquary

From the liturgy of the Scottish Episcopal Church, we now consider another entirely Scottish image. Once you have entered the front door of the new Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, and you have passed by the invitation to visit the restaurant, and

left behind the museum shop, the first *exhibit* you confront, in a glass case almost barring the way into the other galleries, is a small box, about four and a half inches long. It is regarded as one of the Museum's most treasured possessions. It is the Monymusk reliquary (fig. 8). It presides over the entrance to all the galleries in the Museum of Scotland.

The reliquary dates from the eighth century. It is made of wood and metal, and is decorated with fine designs of fantastic animals and patterns. In his discussion of it, Ian Finlay comments that, despite its generally being thought to be a reliquary that once housed bones of St. Columba, there is nothing in the decoration that is recognizable as a Christian symbol.

In the Museum today the label attached to this exhibit recounts the reaction of one young visitor who was amazed to be standing and looking at an object tangibly associated with St. Columba. Reading such reactions one recalls the sense of marvel evinced in the opening of the First Epistle of John: '...what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life...' (I John 1:1).

According to tradition the reliquary was carried before Robert the Bruce's army at Bannockburn, bringing a blessing to the troops. It had an iconic significance like the religious icons from more recent times that were paraded before the Russian army during the Napoleonic wars.

It is a small object. The detail of its decoration is very fine, and the Museum assists the visitor by having beside it enlarged drawings of the decoration. These need to be reproduced by copying and drawing as photography can only with great difficulty capture all that is there. The decoration is of knotwork patterns and strange animals intertwining around the wooden box that once, we believe, held the bones of the saint. What is the impact upon us of such decoration on such an object? Finlay comments in his biography of Columba that we see here an indication that, even while the mission of Columba had taken root in Scotland, the pre-Christian forces had not gone. Throughout the history of early Christian missions we have examples of the Church taking earlier

religious ideas and giving them a Christian interpretation. Indeed, Finlay writes: ‘The reliquary suggests not so much reinterpretation as actual duality of belief, keeping the options open.’ We are not dealing with simple antagonism, ‘but perhaps with the idea that the ancient teaching was looked upon not as false, but as night preceding day.’ Those who first saw it still lived in two different worlds.

And as we look at the reliquary and the possible ways of understanding the symbolism of those fantastic creatures decorating the shrine of the saint, a variety of interpretations also suggest themselves to us. By its shape the reliquary suggests a primitive oratory or chapel. Do we see it, therefore, as expressing the idea that the things of God are contained within the Church, while the pagan world continues on the outside? Does it suggest the dual realities with respect to which those who fashioned or first used it actually lived? Alternatively, do we see the creatures on the box as guarding the sacred relics contained within it – no longer possessing any mastery, they have become the servants and guardians of what lies within, and have been pressed into such service by a superior power? Is it symbolic of the triumph of Christianity over the pagan forces that now must bow before it?

Reflecting on these matters, we may well consider how early Christianity sought to deal with the fear of forces operating in nature that were part of early pagan society and fuelled its religious rituals. We might also recall how it was part of biblical and Christian tradition that it was within the sea that such forces and sources of terror were often believed to lurk. In the sea one is in another realm, and what lurks in the midst of its seaweedy tangles one does not know. On its beaches are to be found quantities of seaweed exhibiting intricate, convoluted and tangled patterns as they dry. They wind themselves into knots, and even their root ends are strangely shaped like the mouths of tiny dragons or sea-serpents. Things expressive of the forces of the sea are thrown up on its beaches in colours of brown, green and orange. They are both weird and wonderful.

In the illuminations of the Lindisfarne Gospels we find that it is as if the random and chaotic patterns exhibited by seaweed have been carefully taken by the scribe and have been transmuted into delicate decoration and letters (fig. 9). Here chaos has become order. The twisting green and brown coils become words in the scribe’s hand as

he illustrates the first verse of St. John's Gospel: 'IN PRINCIPIO ERAT VERBUM' – 'In the beginning was the Word.' That which might simply have fuelled a fear in those who saw it is now used to articulate and express the very Gospel itself.

When we look at the Monymusk reliquary, we realize that its pagan symbolism might have been seen as representing a culture that lived *alongside* that of Christianity in its early days in these islands. And then in the written word of the Lindisfarne Gospels we see those same symbols being used to express the very heart of Christianity and articulate the Christian gospel.

In the decorations on the reliquary we find expressed the varied and complex power of the image. It may have suggested to those who first saw it that, for the time being at any rate, they did live in a world of two cultures, pre-Christian and Christian, and here they were offered a focus for devotion which held those two worlds together. Alternatively, the reliquary may have declared that the pre-Christian world is now taken up into Christianity and must be its servant: the earlier power of these symbols has been overcome. Then in the Lindisfarne Gospels we see that those very symbols are being used to express the Gospel itself. They have been transformed by the artist from material evocative of a deep and fearful marine chaos to being pointers to a heavenly realm. Perhaps for us today the very beauty of the geometric designs of the manuscript has obscured the power they once had in expressing the fear arising from what may lurk deep in the oceans.

Here we may add a note concerning Eric Gill's picture which appears on the cover of this Essay. It is a stark picture and for many, perhaps, an uncomfortable one. It is a deeply Christocentric image, but also deeply erotic. In a strange way the same questions again arise as we begin to interpret it. Is it expressing the fact that Christians necessarily live in two worlds – the ordered world of their religion, and the powerful world of the erotic? Are we given in such a picture an attempt to hold them together in our lives? Or is it expressing the view that the erotic need not be feared, since it can be taken up and offered within a full understanding of the cross and resurrection, and within Christian discipleship? Is it that the erotic symbol of Mary Magdalene pays a kind of feudal homage before the Christ in whom is vested the greater power? Or is this

an image of Christ and his bride the Church, indicating that she has the power, in some sense, to save also? Is it suggesting that erotic imagery itself can now become a vehicle for communicating the truths of the Gospel, and that the very power which is implicit in erotic imagery and images of erotic love – the place where people’s deep hopes and fears do actually lurk in our world – should be used more courageously in the work of Christian communication?

From the ancient art of the Monymusk reliquary to the disturbing modern image of Eric Gill’s print, we find our faith provoked, sustained, troubled and reassured, and our thought and prayer fed by what we see, and how we respond to the power of the visual.

9. Summary and Conclusion

A variety of perspectives has been discussed in this Essay, reflecting the various voices of its authors. This polyphony is perhaps apt. Christianity, as a religion of the Book, has always been ambivalent about the images which lie even at the very heart of its faith, and modern technology in film and science has renewed arguments that are almost as ancient as the Christian tradition itself: the significance of the incarnation and the cross, the images of the liturgy, the power of the image to stir us to great love and violent revolt, to mediate real presences or to mislead into idolatry. We live in an age that perhaps more than any other is affected by the visual and by the persuasiveness of images. We hope that this brief Essay will stir and aid thinking as Christians reflects upon their beliefs and practices.

Further Reading

Bruce Babbington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester University Press, 1993)

A magisterial survey of the relationship between religion and film in the Hollywood cinema.

Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations* (Jonathan Cape, 1968)

A seminal work in the theory of aesthetics that looks at the way in which material relationships in the economic and production systems of industrial societies interact with artistic reproduction.

Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: The Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago University Press, 2000)

A magisterial exploration of both the love for and hatred of images in the history of Western civilization.

David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford University Press, 1999)

David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (Oxford University Press, 2000)

Two books which argue for art as an important part of the developing conversation between God and God's people, not least in developing, retelling or criticizing the biblical narratives.

Colin Buchanan, Trevor Lloyd and Harold Miller (eds.), *Anglican Worship Today* (Collins, 1980)

An attractive illustrated guide to Anglican worship published at a crucial moment of the liturgical reform movement.

J. G. Davies, *The Secular Use of Church Buildings* (SCM Press, 1968)

Though now rather old, this is still a valuable study of the changing use of church buildings, arguing against a false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular.

John Drury, *Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and their Meanings* (Yale University Press, 1999)

A useful survey of Christian art and artists by a theologian.

Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Eerdmans, 1985)

Ellul argues that the visual is in danger of overcoming the verbal in modern societies and that the supplanting of the verbal leads to the suppression of biblical and Christian understandings of reality and truth.

Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (Basic Books, 1988)

Ewen examines the power of design and style from architecture to packaging to shape lives, and the capacity of the image to act as a powerful medium of social control in a mass society.

Ian Finlay, *Columba* (Victor Gollanz, 1979)

A slightly dated but still very useful and informative life of St Columba.

David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago University Press, 1989)

A magisterial survey of art and theory.

Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God* (Mowbray, 1993)

An accessible essay on theology and the arts, by the Bishop of Oxford.

Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison (eds.), *Picturing Science, Producing Art* (Routledge, 1998)

A wide-ranging collection of essays by science studies scholars and art historians exploring the interface between their subjects.

Anthony Julius, *Transgressions* (Thames and Hudson, 2002)

How art has challenged and disobeyed the rules of taste and society.

Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler (Dover Publications, 1977)

A classic essay of which the opening pages are of most interest to the general reader.

Roy Kinnard and Tim Davies, *Divine Images: A History of Jesus on the Screen* (Citadel Press, 1992)

Although it is too old to include Mel Gibson's recent controversial film, this is still a valuable review of 'Jesus' films from their beginning in 1897 to films of the late 1980s.

Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Reaktion Books, 2004)

A detailed and fascinating examination of what happened to the Christian image in art during and after the Reformation of Martin Luther.

Arthur I. Miller, *Insights of Genius: Imagery and Creativity in Science and Art* (Springer-Verlag, 1996)

A readable account of how scientists and artists use visual imagery in their work. It discusses a long-running dispute about the role of the visual in scientific creativity amongst giants of twentieth century physics.

Aidan Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate: Theology and Symbol from Genesis to the Twentieth Century* (Paulist Press, 1980)

A fine one-volume survey of artistic sensibility in the Judaeo-Christian tradition which seeks to link issues and disputes in the iconoclastic debates to twentieth century attitudes to art and the image.

George Pattison, *Art, Modernity and Faith: Restoring the Image* (Macmillan, 1991)

A valuable essay on Christianity's ambivalent history of relating to the power of its images.

Adele Reinhartz, *Scripture on the Silver Screen* (Westminster/ John Knox Press, 2003)

A useful and up-to-date discussion of the use of the Bible in popular cinema.

Nigel Spivey, *Enduring Creation* (Thames and Hudson, 2001)

A view of the relationship between art and pain.

Leo Steinberg, *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper* (Zone Books, 2001)

The re-interpretation and re-visioning of a single painting over the centuries.

George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Faber, 1989)

An intense and powerful defence of art, poetry and music and their capacity to bring us into the realm of theology and the sacred.

Arthur K Wheelock, *Vermeer and the Art of Painting* (Yale University Press, 1995)

The foremost American Vermeer scholar discusses seventeen of his paintings in depth, including 'Lady writing a letter, with her maid'. There are revealing insights into his methods in terms both of the construction of the pictures and of the techniques used in the painting of them.

Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons* (T & T Clark, 2000)

An elegy on cultural loss and the implications of forgetting certain Christian images and narratives.