

TOUCHING GOD IN HIS IMAGE

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The essay defends praying with images (icons) against those who claim this type of prayer is objectionable. The hermeneutical defence consists of three arguments. (a) First I observe that people relate to ordinary photos in ways that cannot be explained in terms of the image's sign-value (or similitude) alone. (b) Second, I develop an account of praying with images as a form of symbolic practice. (c) Finally, in order to bolster my account, I compare icons with a particular class of symbolic objects, viz. relics. The general idea I put forward is that icons have to be understood as expressions of the reality they represent, and not simply as accurate or inaccurate visual representations of that reality. Icons are not created by human hands; instead, the hand of the painter is the instrumental cause of God's self-expression, via the painter, on the canvas.

Recently I ran into an old friend whom I had not seen for some time. He asked me how I was doing, and was pleasantly surprised to learn that I was married. I showed him a picture of my wife, but at the same moment that he complimented her beauty and my good fortune, he made as if to kiss it passionately. Needless to say, I took offense. Although I knew the picture was just a flat piece of paper, and had no delusions that my wife would somehow experience his kiss, I instinctively felt his action to be inappropriate. My irritation was visible and understandable. Of course, he was not really kissing my wife – and yet, it was as if he were kissing her. This 'as if' is not as benign or as innocent as it might appear. On the contrary, my friend's kiss was too intimate; he had placed himself physically too close to my wife.

Imagine a mother who is in anguish at the death of her child. Spontaneously, i.e. pre-reflectively and instinctively, she will take a picture of her child and press it tenderly to her breast. Stroking the photo softly with her hand can be a deeply consoling gesture, one that provides solace in a different way than using the same photo to recall her child in memory. When she presses the picture to her breast, she is treating it as something more than a mere prop to aid her remember her child. At the same time, however, she does not confuse the picture with her child in the act of caressing it; nor does she forget that her child is irrevocably gone. Her gesture, in other words, is not the expression of an intellectual mistake, a symptom of confusion, or a kind of mental illness. Although the photograph is not her child, it is still as if, in it and through it, her child is somehow nearer to her – nearer than he would be if she merely thought about him.

Suppose, by way of experiment, I were to ask the reader to take the picture of a loved one and slash through it with a knife – preferably across the eyes. After all, paper is a lifeless material; there is no harm done. Yet no one would be willing to do that. In general, people would not excuse themselves on the grounds that their loved ones might somehow be harmed by such an act; if someone actually feared the knife really might hurt the person, that belief could easily be disproven. Slicing a photo is not an effective means of harming the person photographed.

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These and similar examples readily come to mind. What hits us in the second case especially is that physical contact with a photograph – *touching* the picture – has the power to console the grieving person in an unusual way. The photograph is not functioning simply as a memory aid. What moves the soul is not the photograph's potential to help one retrieve memories about the deceased person. Rather, stroking the photograph *as such* is consoling for the grieving soul. In the first and third examples, to offer a point of contrast, it is precisely physical contact that must be avoided. It is noteworthy, in the first case, that I would not feel the same irritation if my friend were to kiss the picture of a person who merely looked like my wife – that is, the photo of an exact double. For the same reason, distressed parents also care that the photograph they kiss be authentic; they would not find it nearly as comforting to kiss the photo of a child who resembled their own perfectly. Therefore, resemblance is not enough to account for the peculiar force of the images in these examples. If they were considered merely in light of their informative value, a sharp and close resemblance would be all that is required. In the above examples, however, the photos are not functioning as memory props, nor are they appreciated for their informative value, for again, if this were the case, another (as we say: 'spitting') image would do as well. Resemblance is not what makes a picture, i.e. a similarity, 'true'. A reality that by chance perfectly resembles what a picture represents is not the referent of that picture. The degree of resemblance does not specify the reality that belongs to an image. This being the case, we must examine the truth conditions that must obtain for the category 'similarity' to hold: what causes the truth or the authenticity of a similarity, if resemblance alone is not sufficient? Uncovering the truth condition for similarity is necessary to account for the existential and emotional impact – viz. consolation or indignation – in the examples above.

Ultimately, this essay is not about the unusual power of pictures, but rather about what image-friendly theologians in the Christian tradition called icons, or 'true images' of God. I suggest that the above examples, however, which have no religious meaning, can shed light on the troubled relationship that many religions have with religious images, and images of the divine in particular. The notion that a non-religious phenomenon can help clarify this aspect of religion is, at first sight, not self-evident; it is based on the conviction that the reason for religious uneasiness about religious images is connected to the nature of images themselves, not with their specifically religious content. Images are a sensitive matter in human affairs even outside the context of religion. Religious images in particular are a delicate matter, not because they are images of the divine, but because they are resemblances. One consequence of this suggestion for the debate between proponents and opponents of religious images immediately catches our attention: the cause of the difficulty with religious images should ultimately be sought neither in the tension between the visibility or invisibility of the divine, nor in the tension between divine immanence and transcendence. Something else is at stake in the debate, something that belongs to the register of contact, or to the level of proximity and intimacy. Religions that radically forbid divine images do not do so because they are impossible, i.e. because God *is* without image, or because making an image of Him would deny His 'invisible' essence. In my view, this ontological impossibility is of secondary importance.

Christianity is clearly a fascinating religion insofar reflection on the impact of religious images is concerned. On account of its distinct spirituality and, in particular, its doctrine of God's incarnation in Christ, Church fathers who were hostile to images were not able to justify their aversion by appealing to the argument of God's invisibility. In Christianity, the repugnance before and distrust of images had to be motivated by something other than God's invisibility.

Though I do not have the space here to discuss the Old Testament prohibition against images in detail,¹ it is nevertheless important to recall that God's invisibility – understood either as a relational category (Yahweh is invisible for His people) or as a feature of His being (Yahweh is

without image) – only plays a role in the Old Testament in combination with another argument that is rarely mentioned or commented upon by philosophers, viz. Yahweh's jealousy (*Exodus*, 20, 3–6). Yahweh says that He is jealous and demands exclusive adoration. Strictly speaking, the Old Testament does not explicitly forbid images of Yahweh. What it forbids is the use (in prayer, for instance) of images that represent celestial bodies, animals and human figures. It prohibits addressing Yahweh through images that are not His because doing so would provoke His jealousy and rage. The interesting question here is why this would make Yahweh angry? As I would argue, it is not because He distrusts the intellectual capacities of His people; he is not afraid that they might somehow confuse Him with the image that they use in prayer; nor is He fearful that they will take the image as a new God, or that they will reduce Him to an image. Some philosophers have argued that religious images are forbidden because they cause confusion, that is, because people using them make the mistake of mixing them up with the reality they represent. According to this line of argument, people relate to the image as if it were the person represented therein. One can think, for instance, of how people sometimes speak to religious images and direct their supplications to them, or how they place flowers before a statue.² This apparent confusion that is commonly attributed to people is nevertheless much too great an error for it to be true. No one is so foolish not to know there is a real difference between an image and what it represents. Just as parents do not confuse a picture of their child with their child, so people who pray with images do not confuse them with the reality they stand for.³ The underlying motivation behind Yahweh's prohibition is more interesting than a mere defence against intellectual error.

How, then, should we understand it? How do the radical prohibition of images and the demand for exclusive adoration relate to one another? The prohibition of images essentially concerns the worship of Yahweh. Praying with images in the cult of Yahweh is a religious mistake, but we need to be careful here, for there are different kinds of religious mistakes.⁴ Firstly, praying with images can be *the wrong way* to worship Yahweh. This mistake is to be distinguished from *worshipping the wrong God*. While the first religious mistake constitutes blasphemy, the second falls under the heading of religious adultery, or unfaithfulness. There is no reason for God to be jealous if someone worships him in the wrong way. The Old Testament nevertheless seems to suggest that there is more at stake in image-worship than a faulty mode of religious adoration; what it suggests is that, in the end, the sin is akin to marital infidelity. If it is not identical with infidelity, it certainly leads to it. This is an interesting idea that reminds us of the strong objective force of images. Some images are so powerful that they can dominate our attention. They give our intention a new direction or aim, that was not our original goal; in spite of the ways that images direct and focus our mind's eye, they can deviate from the direction of our intention. Since Yahweh did not reveal His face, the Jewish people, if they were to make use of images in prayer, had to use images of things that were not Yahweh. However, their motivation in doing so was not to adore other gods, i.e. the referents of the images; on the contrary, their intention was to adore Yahweh. Hence, they gave the images a new direction, i.e. a new reference, or a new destination, viz. Yahweh. Adultery was not a part of their original intention. The Jewish people did not set out to adore the calf when they prayed with images of calves. Since they did not recognize any other god than Yahweh, there could be no question of religious infidelity. Instead, their religious mistake was one of blasphemy; it is, to put it simply, rude to pray to Yahweh in this way. The Bible suggests, however, that the Jewish people were also unfaithful. Of themselves, images don't pay any heed to the intentions with which they are loaded. People cannot simply restrict their use of images to referring to something they have in mind; or, to put it somewhat differently, it is never very easy to dissociate the image from its original referent; together, they form a solid whole. Because the referent is deeply attached to

the image and the image cannot be cleanly or easily separated from it, the image has an objective power that is strong enough to oppose the intention with which the user employs it. It can impose an objective direction of its own that is contrary to the one that its user had in mind, or in his heart. Reference, to put it simply, is not a matter of intention. Images cannot be recycled at will, for their objectivity dominates the intentions of those who use them in prayer. Despite the intention of the Jewish people to remain faithful to Yahweh, therefore, they were unintentionally adulterous and unfaithful.

A non-religious example from everyday life can help illustrate this analysis. Imagine that I once had a mistress but that, upon being discovered, I was lucky enough for my marriage to survive the affair. In order to set the situation right again, my mistress and I returned all of the gifts that we had given each other. However, absent-minded as I am, I forgot to return one thing: a picture of her that I had kept in my wallet during the affair. Now imagine that, some years later, my wife asks me for some money, and that I tell her to take it from my wallet. This time I am not so lucky as I was before, for my wife stumbles upon the picture of my long-forgotten mistress. To rescue myself in this awkward predicament, I declare: 'But darling, it is not what you think. I only use the photo to remind myself of our marriage's strength and how we overcame that whole ordeal together. Really, it's just the opposite of what you're thinking!' My desperate appeal would fall flat, of course, for like Yahweh, my wife is now terribly jealous and suspicious of my behavior.

To clarify this idea that a picture can be more than a means of acquiring information about something or to jog our memory of someone, it is useful to broaden our perspective a bit and to appreciate photographs and portraits as *symbolic objects that function in a symbolic practice*. Lighting a candle before the picture of a loved one, touching the name of the deceased that is carved in a headstone, praying for someone in the presence of his image (which is different from addressing yourself to him mentally) – these are all *symbolic actions*.

Allow me to explain what I mean by symbolic actions. For obvious reasons, I prefer to discuss symbolic actions that use symbolic objects; the idea, of course, is that photographs and religious images function as symbols. I then will highlight a special category of symbols (viz. relics) that, insofar as they bear no resemblance to the reality to which they are connected, are clearly to be distinguished from photographs and portraits. These objects stand for realities with which they are causally or metonymically connected, without giving any useful information about their origin or their original owners. If a relic has any informative value at all, it is rather negligible; a relic does not offer a clear idea of the reality to which (or to whom) it once belonged. In the final section of the essay, I will show how photographs with a strong symbolic value (such as the ones in the examples I gave earlier) are, strangely enough, respected for their relic-value. The larger question I will be addressing in this way is the following: what makes an image true? The similarity is true if it has been produced by the reality that it resembles. On this point, I will use the work of Roland Barthes and Saint Augustine to clarify the truth-value of resemblances. The analysis of the truth value of similarities that are linked to the symbolic value of relics will help shed light on the arguments put forward by image-friendly Church fathers who compared praying with the image of Christ to honouring relics. As I shall show, what relics and true images have in common is a causal link to the reality for which they stand: they find their origin in the reality they represent.

This essay is a defence of praying with icons – a defence against those who see this form of prayer as objectionable. The religious value of praying with icons depends on a certain sense for symbolic meanings and requires a community in which this is cultivated. There are two crucial points here. Firstly, it should be clear that the religious value of praying with icons radically diminishes once icons are valued only for their artistic qualities, or, say, when they are

mass-produced for the tourist trade. As the reader will learn, the idea that the painting monk works as an instrument in God's hands is crucial for the constitution of an icon's religious value. These religious metaphors quickly lose their suggestive power when icons become mass-produced. Secondly, we tend to accept praying with icons as meaningful if it is a private prayer. In Byzantine religion, however, this form of prayer is not only a private prayer. It is practised during the community celebration. Moreover, persons praying with icons have to learn to understand and carry out this prayer correctly; in other words, spontaneous as it may be, it presupposes a form of religious education.

1. WHAT ARE SYMBOLS AND WHAT CAN THEY DO FOR US?

A child needs a security blanket in order to sleep. The cloth represents its mother; it stands in her place and functions as her substitute. I am furious with my colleague for one reason or another, but instead of striking him in the face or insulting him, alone in my office, I kick the leg of a table. My wife is away for a couple of days, and, romantic as I am, I cannot help but kiss 'her' goodnight by pressing my lips against her photo and whispering, 'Sleep well, sweetheart'. These are examples of symbolic actions.

A symbol is a substitute for something: x replaces y . Thus, in symbolic activity, a direct expression of hate or love is replaced by a less direct one, one that is not as physically close to the thing that I love, adore or loathe. In x I love or hate something else. My love or hate for y is expressed indirectly via x . The original direction of my act is diverted to x and is transformed into a less direct, mediated action, an action that nevertheless still carries the direction of my original intention. The movement towards x is at the same time a movement towards y . The symbolic action does not physically touch the flesh of the reality intended in the symbol. In the action performed on x it can be crystal clear what the original intention is. As such, a symbolic action can explicitly keep in touch with its original intention. The symbolic action does not, as Freud suggests, repress or hide the original intention. Symbols and symbolic actions do not necessarily call for interpretation, because the reality that a symbol replaces can be immediately evident. The symbolic substitution can be completely transparent.

Symbolic actions create a distance between the person and the reality that he intends (e.g. the distance separating the child from its mother, or me from my colleague). The creation of distance is only one side of symbolisation, however. There is a more significant and intriguing feature to bear in mind as well: symbolic practice consists in the ability to take x as the equivalent of y , i.e. to take x as if it were y . The equivalence is certainly not a perfect one, for the child still prefers a hug from its mother to a blanket, just as I prefer kissing my wife's lips to kissing her picture. One takes x as an equivalent of y even though x is not identical with y . Some argue that the essence of symbolisation consists in making the transition from a concrete to a more abstract level possible; via symbols, so goes a popular argument among philosophers, we are able to transcend our dependency on what is physically given. With symbols we can intend what is not actually present and bridge the distance separating us from it.

But the idea that symbolisation consists in transcending the concrete and in the capacity to intend, via an actual object, what is given *in absentia*, is misleading and incorrect. As Levi-Strauss puts it, symbolization feeds on a passion for the concrete.⁵ The basic gesture of a symbolic action consists in finding the original referent *in* its substitute. Anything that is done to the symbolic substitute, x , is equivalent to performing that same action on y . Throwing my little brother's toy doll under the bed is equivalent to throwing my brother himself into the

garbage can. Kissing the picture of my wife is equivalent to kissing her. The symbolic action renders the original (or more direct) expression of the action to some extent superfluous. The symbolic action takes it over. Hence, I no longer have to do anything to my brother because the puppet is his equivalent. The symbolic action is not just an indirect expression of something else, such as one's desire. It is not the indirect expression of what you wish to do with *y*. Take the symbolic expression of my anger and hatred. I no longer need to hurt you physically; cutting up your picture is sufficient as this gesture is symbolically equivalent to physically hurting you. The symbolic action has the power to satisfy the desire. Similarly, the desire to embrace my wife is at least partially satisfied by acting on her substitute. In doing with *x* what you wish to do with *y*, the symbolic action fulfils your desire for proximity with *y*. Hence the symbol takes over the role and the function of the referent, or to put it somewhat differently, a symbolic action is more than the expression of what a person wants to do with the referent; it actually *performs* the action without there being a question of any confusion between the symbol *x* and the reality that it replaces.

The distinction between sign and symbol should help to clarify this idea of symbolic equivalence. A sign stands for something else, and the reality that it stands for is outside the sign. The sign directs one's attention to a reality that is not contained in the sign. Take for instance a memory-sign. As the term suggests, a memory-sign is an aid for prompting a memory or keeping it alive. As such, the sign points outside itself and leads toward the interiority of the mind. A sign can also lead to a place ahead of it, as is the case with road signs. In both cases, the sign does not draw attention to itself; instead, it redirects one's attention elsewhere. In a similar way, signs that draw too much attention to themselves (e.g. confusingly ornate or witty bathroom signs) detract from their basic sign-function. In order to understand a sign, one has to follow its centrifugal movement.

In the case of symbols, the relation to the intended reality is more complicated. Symbols are a class of signs, but their centrifugal movement goes together with a centripetal one: they incarnate the reality for which they stand by drawing this reality into themselves, as if one were able to discover the replaced reality *in* the symbolic ersatz. Though symbols clearly bear a sign function, they do more than signs that merely remain extrinsic to the reality they stand for. The reality that is replaced by the symbol is thus to be found *in* the symbol itself. In a sign relation, on the other hand, we have to find the reality, not in the sign, but outside the sign.⁶ As symbolic objects *contain* the reality they stand for, they awaken a desire to approach them – to *touch* them, and to seek their physical presence. By touching the carved initials in the monument for the victims of the Vietnam War, for example, one touches the deceased soldier whose name it was. Symbols are therefore the contraction of a double movement: they create a distance between the individual and the reality they stand for and, at the same time, they also overcome that distance. They do not bridge the distance by sublimating the intended reality or by elevating it to a higher, more abstract or spiritual level; on the contrary, they do it by carrying the replaced reality *inside* their womb, as it were.

Some aspects of the distinction between sign and symbol are reflected in the original meaning of the Greek *symbolon*. The Greek noun is related to the verb *sumballein*, which means to join, to connect, or to bring together. The symbol unites what is separated. The potsherds that parting friends gave to each other in ancient Greece were accordingly called symbols: they were the tangible signs that connected them in spite of their separation. They were more than mere memory-signs of the friendship, for they connected the friends to one another. These little potsherds are like the pictures of loved ones we keep in our wallets. We do not keep such pictures in order to look at them now and then – indeed, most people hardly look at them at all. What matters rather is that we have physical contact with the photograph.

2. RELICS: A SEPARATE CLASS OF SYMBOLS.

Like signs, symbols are relational realities; but unlike them, they *embody* the reality for which they stand, meaning that they carry the reality 'in their womb'. One can further distinguish symbols according to how the relation to their referents comes about. Symbolic relations can be established via convention, similarity, or contiguity, to give three brief examples. For my part, I choose to use a criterion of distinction that, as we will see, will take us directly into the heart of the metaphysical tradition of many image-friendly Church fathers, namely, the distinction between artificial and natural symbols. Strangely enough, icons belong to the second category. At first sight, of course, the category of natural symbols might seem to be rather nonsensical. Haven't cultural anthropological studies and philosophers such as Lacan shown that symbols are pre-eminently cultural and, therefore, that a 'natural symbol' is a contradiction-in-terms? According to such views, you cannot separate the human sense for symbols from the cultural artefact. The distinction 'artificial vs. natural' is actually quite relevant and illuminating in the case of symbols, provided that we understand that resemblance is secondary to the more pressing question of how the similarity was originally created. What matters for icons is the question of whether the similarity is handmade (i.e. artificial), or whether it is an expression of the reality that is already represented in it (i.e. natural).

Some symbols are appended to the reality they symbolize; they function like artificial prostheses, as it were. Nevertheless, what is added comes to be so tightly fused together with the reality in question that their connection loses its extrinsic character altogether. Take a proper name, for example. A newborn child does not choose his name; she receives it. The name is given to the child. It is remarkable, however, that once a child's name has been chosen it becomes fixed, as if set in stone: parents cannot imagine calling their child by another name than the one they originally gave to her. The name and the child become one; the name becomes a substantial part of its bearer. True, a proper name can and does function as a means of referring to a person, but in ordinary life, the relation between a proper name and a person is considerably more complicated than that. Though given to someone, it belongs profoundly to the person, as if it were transformed into part of her body. When people distort or make fun of your name, it is as if they are touching or molesting you. Word games that others play with your name are upsetting because they are too close to your skin. When addressing my deceased father through the phrase 'my father', I do more than address myself to him; I touch him as his name passes my lips. Similarly, a lover can use a secret name for his beloved, a name with which he can approach his beloved as nobody else can. These examples show that a name can be much more than just a means to designate someone. When using God's name, one does more than address Him; to pronounce His name is to touch Him with your lips. God is *in* His name; God *is* His name. To write His name is to touch Him with your hands. According to some religions, one is not allowed to pronounce God's name, not because no such name exists or because it is difficult to pronounce properly, but because, just in pronouncing it, you would already be too close to God. To adore God is to love Him; there is no love without respect. Respect here means the virtue of keeping a proper distance within love's proximity. To be sure, there are various gradations of symbols, or of symbolic weights and powers, that we could discuss here: some symbols are stronger and some are weaker. This distinction is a reflection of the degree to which the symbol is embodied.

Natural symbols, on the other hand, receive their special significance, i.e. their weight, from the causal connection they bear to the reality they symbolize. They are produced by, or emerge from, the reality for which they stand. They bear the real, physical traces of their referents; they are a symptom, an imprint, a footprint or an expression of the symbolized reality. Reality

imposes its stamp on the symbol and thus impresses itself in it. Relics (whether religious or otherwise) are the most obvious examples here. They receive their peculiar symbolic surplus-value from the fact that they were a physical part of their referents (e.g. a body part, a lock of hair), because they belonged to them (e.g. clothes), because they once came into contact with them (e.g. Husserl's chair, an autographed picture), or because they were gifts (e.g. my father's watch). In each case, as we see, a relic is not an artificial addition to the symbolized reality, but rather an extension, a protrusion, an offspring or a product thereof. The causal link does not depend on our sense for symbols. Without our sense for symbols, the existence of the causal link – i.e. *y* expressing itself in *x* – would merely be a neutral/natural fact. Objective as it may be, the causal link necessitates a human response in order to become symbolically significant. The causal link between the reality and its symbolic progeny does not imply that *x* is the adequate expression of *y*. What symbolically matters in the category of natural symbols is not the issue of 'what' is impressed (or how well it is impressed), but rather the 'that' of the impression itself. In no way does a relic increase our knowledge of the reality to which it belongs. For a person who wants to know my father better, seeing the chair that he sat on in his office is of little help. There are relics, however, that closely resemble the reality that shaped them. A death mask, for instance, bears both a similarity and a symbolically weighted causal link to the deceased. Both were produced by physical contact with the deceased's face. How do we know that a death mask is a strong symbol? Because people want to touch it; the desire to touch the death mask reveals its symbolic value.⁷

This brings us back to the symbolic value of a photograph. If a picture has a symbolic value, what matters is not *what* I see (i.e. its content), but rather (the fact) *that* the reality depicted in it *produced* the content. What we value is the 'that' of the physical impression. Roland Barthes and St Augustine are two authors who can help to clarify this point.

In *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, Barthes argues that one must understand a photograph as a product of reality: 'The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent.'⁸ To clarify this idea, he refers to the Latin: '“photograph” would be said to be an “*imago lucis opera expressa*”; this is to say an image revealed, “extracted”, “mounted”, “expressed” (like the juice of a lemon) by the action of light'.⁹ The visible photograph is the product of the referent's imprint on the photosensitive film, a mark brought about by the physical force of light. It is a developed impression. The camera is nothing but an instrumental cause through which light can come in and reach the photosensitive material. This causal connection transforms a given reality into the symbolic referent of a photograph. Anything simply resembling the content of a photograph (such as a photo-realistic painting) is not a symbolic referent in the same way, for it was not caused directly by what we see in the image. There is a radical, metaphysical difference between a photograph and a painted portrait. The first is like a death mask or a trace brought about by the reality, while the second is an external addition. Barthes' terminology reminds us of the vocabulary used by the Church fathers who argued that a true image (which is their name of an icon) is consubstantial with its referent: 'Every photograph is somehow co-natural with its referent'.¹⁰

In *Quaestio 74* of his *De diversis quaestionibus LXXXIII*, St. Augustine examines the question of what an image (*imago*) is.¹¹ He distinguishes three notions: image (*imago*), equality (*aequalitas*), and similarity (*similitudo*). He argues that similarity is not a sufficient condition for an image. Two eggs can be perfectly similar, but their resemblance does not make one egg the image of the other. As such, similarity does not give expression to the essence of an image, nor does equality, which refers to the substance of a similarity. On the flipside, however, he also argues that there is no image without some element of similarity. A similar object is an *imago* when it is a reflection that is brought about by (or originates in) the reflected reality – when, that

is, it is an *offspring* of its referent. St. Augustine puts it this way: an image is an *imago expressa*, a term that we just now encountered in Roland Barthes. An *imago expressa* is not an extrinsic addition to the referent, but an extension of it.

St. Augustine's analysis is part of his metaphysical reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity.¹² According to this doctrine, the only true and perfect image of the Father is the invisible Word that is God and is eternally in Him.¹³ Before being incarnated in Christ, the Son was the true image of the Father. The incarnation of the Son made the invisible image in God visible and touchable for His people. An image, in this sense, can be an invisible reality; in this theological perspective, the Word is called the natural image of the Father. The most perfect similarity – the only one that really deserves to be called true – is therefore found in the Son's status as the image of God the Father. According to the Church Fathers who were sympathetic to worshipping God with images and in His image, the *vera icon* finds its origin in Christ. For our purposes, we can bracket the metaphysical aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity and emphasize the fact that, in this theological view, the notion of a true image is inextricably linked to the notions of descent, fatherhood, parenthood and fertility. In this sense there is a deep affinity between an icon and the ontological category of relics.

3. THE BYZANTINE ICONS ARE RELICS TO BE UNDERSTOOD AS A GIFT OF GOD.

Consider the following phrases: 'my father's photograph' or 'the image of my father'. We can understand these genitives in their objective sense as indicating the referent of the photograph. The photograph is, in a sense, 'about' or 'of' my father. But these genitives can also be understood in their subjective and possessive forms. In this sense the genitive suggests that the picture finds its origin in my father. The picture is a self-expression of the reality; the reality expresses itself in the image. When I take a photograph of my father, I am nothing more than an instrumental cause of his self-expression in the photograph, as if the photograph prolonged and expressed a generous movement that preceded my activity, namely, the generosity of my father towards me. This understanding of a photograph is strengthened when the genitive is understood further as a possessive genitive. The picture of my father does not simply refer the viewer to my father's face; it *belongs* to my father, in the sense of being his property, just as it flows out from what is more 'my father' than anything else – his face. Take the Jewish people who made an image of Yahweh; actually, it is not entirely clear which prohibition they were violating. One may wonder, for instance, whether their sin constituted a form of theft, for in making an image of Yahweh, they appropriated a reality – His face – that belonged deeply to Him and that, according to Jewish spirituality, has never been given to His people. One thing is certain here, namely that their religious mistake did not consist in denying the invisibility of Yahweh. As a matter of fact, in the Old Testament, invisibility does not express the truth of Yahweh. Yahweh is not without an image. The point, therefore, is not that the Jewish people did something that was ontologically impossible; no, the people took something away from Yahweh without His consent. To make an image of Yahweh, the Jewish people had to wait until He offers His face to them.

We know that the icons used in prayer often housed relics; the faithful placed the remains of the Cross in them, for instance. The presence of a relic in an icon gives an extra symbolic value to (and even predominates over) any similarity between the icon and Christ.¹⁴ But in a certain sense relics have no need of being added to true images, because true images are already relics in and of themselves. Icons are relics insofar as the similarity that characterizes the icon is an expression of the reality represented in the icon. The relic-value of the icon gives a deeper

spiritual and metaphysical meaning to the psychological comparison made by image-friendly Church Fathers. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, often compares icons with relics that, unlike images, do *not* resemble the reality they stand for.¹⁵ For a pious person, deeply marked by the mysteries of Christianity, the icon is already a relic. In a true image (or a *vera icon*), correspondence does not make the similarity true and symbolically valuable. Instead, its symbolic value depends on the question of how the likeness was brought about. Instead of simply representing God, God is understood to impress Himself in the icon and to use the hand of the painting monk as His instrument.

The Old Testament makes worship with images objectionable by pointing out that this practice involves worshipping man-made objects. How can you worship something that your own hands have created? According to image-friendly Church Fathers, however, this is not how icons ought to be understood. According to them, icons are *acheiropoietoi*, meaning that human hands did not make them. A true image is not a mere imitation, because it originates *in* its referent and is similar to it for this reason. Monks do not paint icons with their hands or on their own initiative; their images of Christ are not products of their imagination, nor are they grounded in personal knowledge of what Jesus, as an historical figure, actually looked like. Monks are rather the blind vehicles through which Christ paints *himself*. An angel guides the movements of the monk's hand as it traces, circumscribes and develops the contours of Christ's face. Icons are therefore not imitations, but rather blind copies of a prototype whose origin is Christ himself. To paint an icon is, in this sense, to *receive* it. So as not to obscure the truth with all manner of disturbing subjective additions, the monk's mind must be purified or emptied beforehand. Everything in this symbolic practice is meant to eliminate and neutralise any reference to human intervention and creativity. Originality, inspiration, imagination and creativity lead the praying and painting soul *away* from the purity of the gift. At the same time, we could also say that an icon's function is *not* that of a door leading to the infinity of the divine; on the contrary, we should say rather that pious people are able to search (even to touch) the divine in icons because God manifests Himself in them.

Because icons are relics, they are also valued as powerful symbols, i.e. as embodiments of the reality that expresses itself through them. The idea that strong symbols incarnate the reality they stand for explains why painting icons and praying with them is all about respect. Respect, again, is the virtue, or art, of maintaining the right distance from a reality and its symbolic embodiments. The symbolic practice of worshipping God in icons is all about keeping the right distance (or proximity) in relation to Him. Symbols *participate* in the reality they represent because they are expressions of this reality. By touching icons, by kissing and caressing them, the pious soul participates directly in God, who is present in His gift. Pious people praying with icons do not simply regard them, moreover – they honour an icon with a kiss. They do what is suggested in the Greek canon of Nicea from 787. This text uses the beautiful term *aspazomai*, usually translated 'to venerate, to honour'. But *aspazomai* has a stronger sense in Greek: it means to kiss and to embrace. To honour Christ in His icon is therefore to kiss Him in His icon.¹⁶ For some, this prayer is so abhorrent that they are inclined to dream of a religion purified from symbols that can be touched. A true relation to God, according to this argument, must be found in prayer of the heart. Accordingly they forbid the use of icons; they forbid people to touch them. Those who promote worship with icons know how intimate this prayer is. Indeed, they often encourage you to touch Christ with your tears, while at the same time warning you not to come too close to Him. The awareness that, in spite of an icon's being given by God, the embrace of God may become too intimate, inappropriate or impudent, explains why and how in 1768 in a Synod at Turin, Church Fathers discussed the different kind of images that were permitted. 'Est illis hoc adagium receptum atque familiar: Nullam imaginem colendam esse,

cujus nasum duobus possis digitis complecti' ('This adage was adopted by them and is well-known: No image whose nose you can grasp between your fingers is to be made the object of religious observance').¹⁷ Three-dimensional sculptures therefore were forbidden. Touching a flat surface is, after all, less intrusive than grasping an image with your hands. What the Church Fathers feared, in short, was that, while praying with a sculpture, one might be tempted to pinch Christ's nose between one's thumb and forefinger – that, as they reasoned, is something that one simply doesn't do.

Notes

- 1 M. Halbertal and A. Margalit, *Idolatry*. Cambridge, Mass./London, 1992.
- 2 St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson, Harmondsworth, England, Penguin, 1984, p. 250.
- 3 For this argument see L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Ed. C. Barret, Oxford, 1966, pp. 61–62.
- 4 E. Bevan, *Holy Images. An Inquiry into Idolatry and Image Worship in Ancient Paganism and in Christianity*. London, 1940, p. 17 and 39.
- 5 Cl. Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*. Paris, Plon, 1962, p. 291.
- 6 M. Polanyi and H. Prosch, *Meaning*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1975. P. Moyaert, 'Incarnation of meaning and the sense for symbols: phenomenological remarks on a theological debate', in: L. Boeve, L. Leijssen (Eds.), *Sacramental presence in a postmodern context: fundamental theological perspectives*, Leuven, Peeters, 2001, pp. 112–129.
- 7 R. Breeur and A. Burms, 'Persons and relics', *Ratio*, 21 (2) 2008, pp. 134–146.
- 8 R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, London, Flamingo, 1982, 80.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 11 St. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus LXXXIII*, quaestio 74, *Patrologia Latina* 40, pp. 213–214.
- 12 R. Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 50–55.
- 13 M. Schmaus, 'Die psychologische Trinitätslehre des hl. Augustinus', in: *Münsterische Beiträge zur Theologie*, 1927, Heft 11, pp. 361–369.
- 14 Ch. Barber, *Figure and Likeness. On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm*. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 13–37.
- 15 Gregory of Nyssa, *Patrologia Graeca* 46, col. 740AB. See: *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, 'Images', p. 815. E. Kitzinger, 'The Cult of Images before Iconoclasm', in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 1954, 8, p. 116.
- 16 B. Baert, *To Touch with the Gaze. Noli me tangere and the Iconic Space*. Oostakker, Sint Joris, 2012, pp. 5–19. J.L. Nancy, *Noli me tangere: essai sur la levée du corps*. Paris, Bayard, 2007.
- 17 C.I. Ansaldi, *De sacro et publico apud ethnicorum picturarum tabularum cultu*. Turin, Augustae Taurinorum, 1768, p. 11. See: G. Bevan, *Holy Images*, p. 148.

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