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INTRODUCTION

William Schweiker and Michael Welker

This book documents results of a research project which was meant to explore fruitful commonalities and fruitful differences among the Jewish, the Christian and the Islamic traditions. Over against conventional doctrinal and comparative religious explorations, we wanted to explore the impact that the basic contents of faith and practice have on cultures and their forms of ethos. This approach was chosen to relate different traditions of research to each other—one more dominant in the European contexts (the so-called *Geistesgeschichte*) and the other in the Anglo-American world, one based on cultural and social studies. When we started the project the majority of our group voted for the title “Images of the Divine and Cultural Orientations.” An introduction to the chapters that follow can be usefully isolated through attention to the title of the volume, the problems it implies, and the challenge it puts to the study of the religions, including theology.

1. Image and Culture

In marked contrast to the contemporary globalized media and the flood of images that saturate, inform, and orient people’s imaginations around the world, the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions share in different forms and degrees the rejection of what is called “image-worship.” We read: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them ...” (Ex 20:4f; cf. Dtn 5:8 and Dtn 4:16-19).¹ Yet, ironically, we also find in the Holy Scriptures a multitude of images of the Divine and the divine glory. In the *Tanach* (Hebrew Scripture) the human being is called the “image of God” (Gen 1:26f, 5:1, 9:6) and in the New Testament of the Christian Bible they receive the promise that they will bear the image of the “second *anthropos*” (or the second Adam) from heaven (1Cor 15:49; cf. Rom 8:29), namely, Jesus Christ, “who reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature” (Heb 1:3). Likewise, in the Qur’an, there is a strict prohibition of making images of the divine even as Allah has a hundred names and human beings are the “viceregents” of God on earth.²

¹ All biblical references in this chapter will be from the Revised Standard Version.

² See *Humanity Before God: Contemporary Faces of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Ethics*, eds. W. Schweiker, K. Jung, and M. Johnson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006).

Within these religious traditions, how does one relate the criticism of images with the diverse names and images of God in Holy Scripture, and with claims about God's revelation? Jews, Muslims, and Christians must think about, pray to, and worship a reality which, in any precise sense, cannot be adequately imagined or conceived, and, yet, also think, pray, and worship within the context of the religious life teeming with a multitude of names and images: God as one, God as power, God as the merciful and most high one, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a pillar of smoke leading the people out of Egypt, Christ as the Son of God, Moses the Law-giver, and Muhammed the "seal of the prophets," and on and on. In the face of this paradox of the criticism of images but their proliferation, how is one to avoid falling into a deafening silence about the divine or skepticism about God's reality and power? This challenge we can call "the iconic problem" of theology.

However, the "iconic problem" is not only a theological puzzle. It can also be raised with respect to any call for religious "cultural orientation" and brings us to the second major term in the title of this book, namely, "culture." Is culture a powerful icon or regulative ideal meant to provide orientation to human personal and social life? Kathryn Tanner, Terry Eagleton and others alerted us to the enormous complexity of the phenomenon of culture, which explains the fascination and enthusiasm with this topic in the academy and in the media.³ 'Culture' offers a realistic and a constructivist dimension. It can also be a descriptive (say, American culture) or an evaluative and even a normative term (say, high or low or pop culture). Culture includes the actual and the desirable notion of reality and—at least in a vague way—a vision or visions of perfection. Who wants to be "un-cultured?" The idea of culture is often and understandably related to claims about education and its importance in human existence. Culture is not only seen as a complex human activity, but as a complex state of actual and possible human affairs. And culture concentrates not only on natural reality, but also on spiritual and symbolic realities. Not surprisingly, in eighteenth-century Europe, 'culture' became equated with 'civilization' and correlated with all kinds of modern progress.

Since J. G. Herder in the nineteenth century, one witnesses social developments that have led to changes in ideas about culture, especially in our global age: the pluralisation of cultures, the critique of Eurocentric ideas of culture, and the emergence of a multicontextual ways of thinking about it. A nuanced approach towards different cultures across the globe and a continuous growth in the awareness of the social and cultural differentiations in complex societies is now, thankfully, the standard for all relevant investigations of the the idea of culture and also actual cultures. As Terry Eagleton noticed laconically, "The complexity of the idea of culture is nowhere more graphically demonstrated than in the fact that its most eminent theorist in post-war Britain, Raymond Williams, defines it at various times to mean the standard of perfection, a habit of mind, the arts, general intellectual development, a whole way of life, a signifying system, a structure of feeling, the

³ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997) and Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

interrelations of elements in a way of life and everything from economic production and the family to political institutions.”⁴

Granting the problems with ideas about culture, problems that now characterize our global age, most of the definitions and theories of culture seem to agree, explicitly or implicitly, on the fact that culture serves to secure continuities in the communication among human beings via memories and expectations. With the help of their culture(s) peoples develop amazing abilities to connect and to disconnect, to share and to differentiate, memories and expectations. People anticipate, reproduce and reconstruct in memories and imaginations what others remember, anticipate, and expect. Moving in the realms of memory and imagination, people can attune individual and communal emotions as well as thoughts and practices in powerful ways. In this way, cultures allow people to respond to the perceptions of their lives by others even as their perceptions reflectively shape those whom they engage. The reflexive dynamic of the mutual shaping of self-perception would seem to be basic to the communicative logic of culture, especially in our global media age. Among the religious, how one is seen by others shapes, for good and for ill, the self-understanding of peoples, a shaping power that is, sadly, too often resisted through violent reactions driven by fundamentalistic ideologies or, conversely, the deluting of traditions into vague patterns of thought, practice, and spirituality.

Despite all of these problems and challenges, it must still be said that the enormous individual and communal power to create worlds of memories and imaginations, to store, select, connect, and shape them, and to process and attune powerful streams of information, illumination, thoughts and emotions discloses the human spirit in and through cultural forms. And this same spirit can and does shape the consciousness of others through cultural communication even as one is being shaped by this same reflexive process. For this reason, the interpretation and assessment of culture(s), one task of this book, is a means to examine human existence itself, the structures of lived human reality in real and imagined worlds, and thus also to understand people’s capacities to create meaningful worlds.⁵

The challenge to understand the many processes of cultural memory and the many forms of imagination and their impact on the different societal systems is enormous.⁶ This challenge is heightened by the awareness that the global flux of cultural forms has to wrestle with enormous local and global distortions: massive injustice, poverty and ecological destruction in the contemporary world; the threat of relativism, cynicism, and apathy; the weakening and distortion of cultural and canonical memory by the enormous powers of the market, the media, and technology; the long term crisis and the potential restitutions of the ideologies of

⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, 36.

⁵ See William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

⁶ Cf. Michael Welker, “Kommunikatives, kollektives, kulturelles und kanonisches Gedächtnis,” in *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie, Bd. 22: Die Macht der Erinnerung* (Neukirchener: Neukirchen-Vluyn 2008), 321-331.

the nation state in the context of the current crisis of the monetary system; and, the different speed of the shift from the modern to the post-modern paradigms and mentalities across the globe.

2. The Tasks of this Book

Mindful of the complexity of ideas about images within religious traditions and also culture as a human reality, the context of this book is the current global reality where images and cultures interact with increasing speed and intensity. However, our purpose in the following chapters is not only to explore the great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) through the framework of the interactions among “images,” the iconic problem, and “culture(s).” While that is indeed one of the tasks of this book, a task that, to be honest, alone would justify the scholarly labor found in the book’s pages. Yet beyond the work of interpreting the exceedingly complex ways that the monotheistic religions have provided orientation to human cultures in and through their images of the divine, two other tasks define the purpose of this book.

Another task of this book beyond exploring the religions within different historic-social contexts is decidedly “constructive.” That is to say, some of the authors represented in this book, but by no means all of them, seek to show that the monotheistic faith with their specific forms of the iconic problem in giving people cultural orientation, have, nevertheless, surprising power to speak to the global situation marked by a whirlwind of images transgressing and ingressing into cultures. This whirlwind both facilitates understanding among cultures but also blocks and distorts mutual understanding. In this situation, the constructive religious thinker must sort through distortions in his or her own tradition and its reflexive relations to other religious and non-religious global cultural forms. Additionally, the constructive thinker is audacious enough to seek to show that the resources of his or her religious tradition can provide decisive cultural orientation amid global cultural flows that are missing in other interpretation of the current situation: say, economic, political, media, non-governmental, environmental, scientific, or sociological forms of interpretation. This constructive task is the most daring purpose of this book and yet it arises organically out of the materials studied and the context in which we now live and think.

The third and final task of this book compliments its analysis of religious traditions and its forays into constructive religious thinking. This third task is modeled in the book as a whole more than finding explicit expression in any of its parts. That is to say, the book seeks to model a way for Muslims, Christians, and Jews to interpret and live out their faiths and practices in a global context that too often circulates images of the divine and religious orientations in life in their most violent, inhumane, and destructive forms. Is there a way to be religious that is deeply steeped in and committed to a religious tradition and yet avoid amid the challenges of the global age both fundamentalistic ideologies and vague spiritualities? By answering to that question, the book provide examples of being

Christian, being Muslim, and being Jewish that demonstrate the cultural orienting power of these three great religions in a time when global realities too often and too powerfully thwart human understanding and flourishing. In this way, the book is a testimony to the cultural orientation now possible for religious people who are fully mindful of the challenges of global times.

These three tasks undertaken in and through the examination of religious traditions, cultural contexts, and the “iconic problem” help to explain the structure of this volume. We begin in **Part I** with articles that explore features of the “iconic problem” itself as well as its forms and uses in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Longstanding debates about the knowableness and also invisibility of the divine are approached historically and also constructively. In our global age marked by the whirlwind of images shaping human consciousness through the medial system, it is remarkable the insights these ancient religions bring to explore the place of “images” in human thought and life.

Part II explores “spiritual transformation” of human life in relation to images of the divine in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. These chapters seek to understand the operative power of the divine to transform and orient human life. Importantly, the chapters show the depth and richness of these traditions to orient and empower spiritual transformations in ways radically distinct from vague, popular forms of “spirituality” or fundamentalistic ideologies.

Part III of the book examines a more specific form of human life, namely, the elevation of human life in relation to the divine. Here one can see how “images of the divine” are used by these traditions to think about the dynamics of human existence and the highest human good. This process of elevation is not a condition contrary to the meaning of being human, it is not a denial of one’s humanity, as many of the critics of religion contend. Quite the inverse is the case. The elevation of life in and through divine power is in fact an elevation into true humanity; it is to be fully and profoundly alive. Taken together, the Parts of the book provide incisive examinations of the monotheistic traditions within the framework of the problems and challenges denoted by the title of this book.

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