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Afterword: The Visual Culture of Revelation

David Morgan

The chapters comprising this book have productively explored a host of interrelated themes – imagination, sensation, figuration, images, the destruction or banning of images, and the aesthetics of perception and feeling that organize this range of experience. Attentive readers will not have missed that a golden thread running through the fabric of work is embodiment as a fundamental feature of the three religions that occupy the authors: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. To be sure, the traditions differ from one another in important ways on the treatment of the body as a culturally conditioned and historically constructed set of sensibilities and affordances. But in every case, the dynamics of sensation and representation, the use of and anxiety about imagery, and the forms of perception and imagination produce the matrix in which the sacred takes shape, in particular, how both transcendence and revelation are understood to operate.

In each of the religious traditions examined by the authors, transcendence and revelation characterize the interface of divine and human at every turn. The deity in each case transcends human control, comprehension and physical limitation. And any claim to knowledge about or access to the deity rides on the deity's self-revelation to humankind. Each of these deeply interlinked ideas clearly shows that these religions are obsessed with the enforcement and negotiation of boundaries. Durkheim considered one of the elementary features of religion to be the construction of sacrality and we find that fully at work in the maintenance as well as the crossing of boundaries – both the separation of divine from human and the separation of objects, words, rites, spaces, food, animals and people that are able in turn, by virtue of consecration, to approach the divine.

The deity in each tradition is inconceivable without the concepts of transcendence and revelation: an unseen, incomprehensible and all-powerful deity manifests itself in a distinctly determinative way – as the one who covenants with a particular people, as the one who takes on flesh in the person of the messiah, and as the one who makes known to his prophet his will for the true path. Each act becomes the authoritative basis for knowing what the deity expects of followers. Yet as soon as we say that, it is necessary to recognize that the function of revelation and transcendence is more than a matter of producing knowledge. They are forms of imagination no less than categories for properly understanding particular deities.

It is certainly true that for each of these religious traditions, but especially for Christianity and Islam, the product of divine revelation is correct knowledge or teaching – the etymological origin of *orthodoxy*. But the study of religion in the past several decades has come to stress that religions are more than cognitive claims and normative formulae. A religion, in other words, is more than a creed or doctrine and the institutional authorities that endorse it. Certainly, this is one important aspect, especially in the book-driven traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But the contributors to this volume have urged in various ways, with broadly ranging forms of evidence – from art, architecture and sensation to aesthetic experience in addition to a careful study of textual traditions – that images and other forms of figuration not only register religious values, but shape and generate them. In chapter after chapter, the authors point us to embodiment and imagination as characteristic features of these three religions.

Transcendence and revelation are forms of imagination inasmuch as they figure the unfigurable, making it accessible in some manner, at least something one can talk about and act towards. I would like to argue that everything people imagine is grounded on something embodied and actual. God is like a king – vaunted, remote, majestic, powerful, glorious. These are forms of transcendence that promise the possibility of the other feature of religion – revelation. That which is hidden can come to light, the remote can come near, the concealed can be unveiled. The invisible can become visible. Of course, it is not a complete identification of the deity with its figuration, although opponents of imagery such as the eleventh-century Muslim scholar al-Juwayni (see Gruber in this volume) or sixteenth-century Protestant John Calvin insisted that any formulation of God in the imagination is a creation of something other than the deity, and is therefore idolatrous. Likewise, Calvin and the thirteenth-century Shafi scholar, al-Nawawi, regarded the act of imagination as a presumption on God's majesty and sovereignty (see Shaw in this volume). Calvin referred to the human mind as a 'perpetual forge of idols' because the imagination produced an image of the biblical God that was not the deity, and therefore a lie, or an idol.¹ Al-Nawawi indicated that making a picture of any living thing 'imitates the creative activity of God' and will result in 'grievous punishment' (see Shaw).

Yet every tradition compares the deity to something, a sensation, a king, a maker (potter, architect, artist). The divine essence may be hidden and incomprehensible, but it remains possible to speak of the deity and to characterize his attitude or disposition towards human beings and the created world. The divine is figurable, yet not reducible to a figure. The body's coordinates remain the framework for thought and feeling and therefore are indispensable as the means of configuring a relationship between human and divine. Terje Stordalen (this volume) considers the role of darkness and emptiness as fitting evocations for the divine in the Temple of Jerusalem. And Else Marie Bukdahl (this volume) explores the philosophical tradition of the sublime as a vital resource for theological aesthetics and modern Christian artists from Caspar David Friedrich to Gerhard Richter. The comparable task for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, in spite of their many differences, is not to capture the hidden nature of the deity, but rather to prepare the body to respond via imagination to the divine. Kalman Bland in this volume quotes a thirteenth-century Aramaic rendition of a ninth-century Arabic text

by a Nestorian Christian, Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, living in Baghdad. Ḥunayn noted that the architectural spaces of Jews, Christians, and Muslims all exhibit ornamental designs or images: 'All of this is meant to refresh and expand their souls by their means and to engage their hearts with the [decorations, ornaments, and images]' (see Bland in this volume, p. 130.). The function of art, in other words, may be said to shape the sensory and imaginative conditions for worship. Anxieties about the presumption of this practice, the menace of overextending it, persists in all three religious traditions. But the propriety of theological constraint is not the concern of scholars. Instead, the evidence – textual and material – points us to develop a recognition of aesthetic sensibilities as a fundamental aspect of religious experience and to complexify our understanding of the categories of revelation and transcendence as grounded in figuration and sensation, in embodiment.

To non-believers, revelation undermines natural order as an extraordinary event. But for those who believe, for those immersed in an ongoing relatedness to their deities, revelation is how the gods make themselves known, how they warn, punish, assist, encourage, reward and nurture their followers. A divinity's act of revelation may be unusually special or daily events, but in every case, the revelation answers to a perceived need or problem, a body of lore, ritual practices, a community's situation, and a history of invocation and valuation. This means that signs or omens are not simply arbitrary or invented. Their structure is motivated – by tradition, by exigence, by the power that produces them, and by the consequences of their occurrence since every sign, if it is to persist as a sign, must be couched within an interpretive narrative after it occurs. Thus, signs are both arbitrary and motivated. They are the product of a system, a grammar and syntax that organizes signs into intelligible patterns; but they are also the manifestation or expression of unseen forces. This double life of the sign is critical for any engaging account of revelation because the two characteristics of signs often function to conceal one another in the service of the religious enterprise of supernaturalizing revelation, or, for that matter, the scholarly project of reducing revelation to historical construction or ideological artifice.

An example will make these general characteristics clear. According to the four Gospel narratives of the New Testament, following his execution, Jesus was buried. A few days later something happened that the early community debated and eventually experienced as a powerful sign: when some of his followers visited the grave to anoint his body, Jesus was gone. The tomb was empty. Contemporary Jewish authorities had feared that Jesus's followers would secret the body away (Matt. 27.64-6). But for the devotees who believed or soon came to believe that Jesus was not dead, the empty tomb became a sign of his resurrection, more specifically, his triumph over death and the power of sin. God had not abandoned Jesus on the cross, as Jesus himself had feared in the grip of despair.

What precisely happened, a moment-by-moment narration of what took place after he expired on the cross and was laid to rest, is not represented in the New Testament account, written within sixty or seventy years of Jesus's death. But Paul's letters, produced before the Gospels, make it clear that a basic teaching of his included Christ's bodily resurrection three days after his death (see 1 Cor. 15.3-7). Only one brief biblical text, 1 Pet. 3.19-20, states that Jesus, having been 'made alive again', descended to hell to preach to those who had died in the days of Noah's flood. This bare passage became

the canonical warrant for the 'harrowing of hell', and was expanded to include the early biblical patriarchs including Adam and Eve. The idea was asserted as early as the second century and narrated in detail in the fourth-century Gospel of Nicodemus. The belief had become so established by the fourth century that the phrase '*descendit ad inferos*' was included in the Apostles Creed. The Gospel of Nicodemus describes the 'Lord of Glory' bursting the doors of hell asunder and startling the power of darkness while Jesus reclaims Adam. It is a triumphant account worthy of a victorious saviour, the sort of narration that would have appealed to fourth-century Christians who had witnessed the vindication of their religion in imperial Rome. It was not the story of a humble Palestinian carpenter put to death by Rome, but a paean to a glorious ruler who descends to the dark vaults of hell to reorganize cosmic history en route to enthronement at the right hand of the monarch of the universe.

For nearly one thousand years, the standard iconographical practice in Byzantine and Western Christian art was to depict the resurrection, or *anastasis*, of Jesus by showing him in the act of harrowing hell. By the thirteenth century, however, that began to change. A remarkable set of images published in 1511 by the German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) portrayed the image of the harrowing in a woodcut cycle, *The Passion of Our Lord Jesus*. But on the following page, Dürer also presented a more recent depiction of the subject of the resurrection, the version that became the iconic motif of Christ's resurrection in European art during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Figure 16.1). Dürer's inclusion of both images in his Passion narrative is a remarkable redundancy: the revelation of the essential salvific event in the life of Jesus is shown *twice* – once as a trip to hell and a second time as a bodily appearance at his tomb. Why? What do we learn about the nature of revelation and its signification in visual culture in this *doppelgänger*? It had become critical since the twelfth century, when a series of condemnations of the Cathar reform movement in southern France rejected as heresy what amounted to a neo-Gnostic view of matter as inherently evil among the Cathars. The view included a rejection of the incarnation and of the sacraments. The Cathars likewise dismissed the physical resurrection of Jesus as a corrupt teaching.² The conflict culminated in long and bloody violence during the thirteenth-century Albigensian Crusade. The mainstream Church responded by stressing the orthodoxy of Christian teaching and the Dominicans were deployed in the inauguration of the Inquisition to ferret out the heresy and endorse orthodox views. Such views were ubiquitously propagandized by thirteenth- and fourteenth-century devotional art that portrayed the physical body of Jesus resurrected at graveside in iconography that directly informed Dürer's *Passion*.

In Dürer's *Resurrection of Christ* (see Figure 16.1), Jesus stands atop the still-closed tomb, which bears the seal and is surrounded by a Roman guard as proof of the miraculous nature of the event in contrast to detractors who insisted his corpse had been stolen from the grave (Matt. 27.64–6). In a silent nocturnal scene, the risen Christ appears in a smoky burst of light that unfurls from the point at which his feet touch the obdurate stone lid. If we take the biblical accounts recorded in three Gospels (Matthew, Luke and John) as ancient sources that serve to motivate visual representation of the resurrection of Jesus as a physical event, it is striking that Dürer's woodcut portrays a moment that is not narrated by the New Testament at all. Elements of the picture draw

Figure 16.1 Albrecht Dürer, *The Resurrection of Christ*, in the woodcut cycle *The Passion of Our Lord Jesus*, 1511. Public domain.

from the Gospel of Matthew such as the detail of soldiers gathered about the tomb are described as dispatched by Pilate at the request of the Pharisees (Matt. 27.62-3). But in fact, it was not until the later Middle Ages that the representation of the resurrection of Jesus showed him at the tomb.

This meant inventing new iconography that filled in the gaps of the Gospel accounts (see Brunotte's discussion in this volume of the 'blanks' of texts). In effect, the revelation of the biblical text was extended by the visual programmes such as Figure 16.1. A scene that did not appear in any of the Gospels was created as the precise moment of the physical resurrection of Jesus. Revelation, in effect, is an event portrayed in tandem with the contextual need for it. And details in Dürer's woodcut show how the event itself adjusts the written accounts to provide a visual bulwark against which orthodoxy

could find a secure footing from which to endorse its view of matter and spirit and their relationship to one another. But by 1511, the Cathar heresy had faded from memory. Indeed, Dürer and most of his viewers may have been quite unaware of it. This forgetting of the origin of the motif at work in Figure 16.1, however, is part of the power of the image: it replaces that origin with the pervasive notion of portraying the event itself.

Why doesn't the disjuncture of visual portrayal and historical narrative disrupt the credibility of the image? The image only scantily conforms to what the New Testament records. In Matt. 28.2-4 we read that on Easter morning 'an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.' This is as close as anything in the Gospel narratives of the resurrection comes to Dürer's image and those of countless others since the fourteenth century. Evidently, visual tradition compensates for the shortcomings of the textual record. A Northern European tradition of two centuries of portraying the event motivated Dürer's image more than the biblical texts. His woodcut looked like the resurrection because it looked like scores of images that viewers had seen before. Revelation is recognizable when it conforms to a standard of seeing what people understand to be the truth. Like many artists before him, Dürer showed the soldiers in the foreground as sleeping, though in the dimly lit middle distance we note that a few are awake and witnessing the event that flashes before them. As solid as Jesus appears to be, he stands entirely within the fulminating aura that surrounds him. His triumphal banner billows in what must be a sudden rush of air at his corporeal appearance and the outward press of smoke and light seem to suggest that the very fabric of reality has opened up, unpeeling to reveal the physical man who will step forth into the three-dimensional realm of the created world, where he will take up the rather furtive series of post-Easter appearances unevenly narrated in the Gospels of Luke and John. His resurrection appears as an eruption along the very axis of death marked by the staff he holds. And the momentary character of it is marked by the gestures of recognition evident in one or two soldiers even as those nearest us continue to snore.

The purpose of the spreading cloud about Jesus is to convey his miraculous return, to perform his epiphany as a form of ontological unveiling. The laws of matter and energy are being controverted in a theatrical moment of great drama. A momentous event is in the making, something profound unfolds before viewers, who behold a stage effect. They watch a presentation that meets those of faith when it reaches beyond the stage to touch them. In order to connect with viewers and enact revelation, Dürer's image needs to break out of the scene, a time frame, or a register that separates the event from the time and space of those looking at it, listening to it and expecting something from it. In Figure 16.1, the body of Jesus must cross from death to life and from the past to the present. Put differently, three different registers must coincide in a single, scintillating moment of presence to one another: the afterworld from which Jesus steps, the world of the narrated present into which he steps, and the world of the viewer to which he presents himself. This third register often eludes our notice. Images readily cloak the very situated act of being seen, as if they unveiled their content without the

apprehension of those looking on. This is certainly the magic that Dürer deploys in his narrative cycle of the Passion of Jesus. It is an effect that is very familiar to modern viewers of cinema and photographic essays: viewers may regard themselves as a passive presence who do nothing more than watch. But the aspect of seeing that I want to draw attention to is *be-holding*, taking a grip on what is seen in the sense of imposing one's bodily, cultural, temporal conditions in the act of seeing. Revelation does not happen without this dimension since these conditions structure the act of reception.

This arc of movement from past to present, from unseen to seen, from transcendent to immanent is the *point* of images like Dürer's. I mean by 'point' what Roland Barthes called the 'punctum' of photographs: the pricking or wounding that an image exerts on viewers independently, acting as something in itself and not as a representation of something else (Barthes 1993: 26–7, 45). This point becomes clear in the title page of Dürer's *Passion* (Figure 16.2), in which the scourged Jesus, taunted by a soldier, is nestled within a cloudy border and from which he peers piercingly into the eyes of viewers. The scene draws from a brief description in the Gospels, but goes far beyond it. Matthew 27 indicates that Pilate's soldiers placed a crown of thorns on Jesus's head, a reed in his hand, and mocked him. What is *striking* about this image is the way in which Jesus gazes outward, beyond the scene, seeking out the eye of the viewer. We also note the similar use of an unfurling cloud in which the scene is nested. Why is it there? Perhaps it frames the humiliation of Jesus and his address to viewers as an act of revelation, a reaching out from the past to the viewers' present. It shows Christ's

Figure 16.2 Albrecht Dürer, *The Mocking of Christ*, in the woodcut cycle *The Passion of Our Lord Jesus*, 1511. Public domain.

suffering as ongoing and for the viewers, motivated by them as well as benefitting them. The abusive soldier stands in for latter-day viewers, whom a Latin verse below the image addresses directly as mirroring the soldier who mocks Jesus: 'You are guilty of striking me often.'

These cruel wounds I have borne for you, man,
 And paid for your sickness with my blood.
 God cancels your wounds with my wounds and your death with mine:
 For you I was made a creature,
 Yet you are ungrateful to me, and you prick my wounds
 Again and again, you are guilty of striking me often.
 Is it not enough that I once suffered so many torments under the Jews?
 Now, my friend, you may rest.³

The same image was sometimes used to illustrate the cover of Luther's 1519 sermon, 'Meditation on the Passion of Christ', where we read the same indictment of the sinner: 'when you see nails piercing Christ's hands, you can be certain that it is your work. When you behold his crown of thorns, you may rest assured that these are your evil thoughts' (Luther 1969: 9). In the visual culture of revelation, the image serves to link the historical with the existential, the past with the present, the metaphysical with the bodily in an act of imagination that unfolds in an embodied experience. Revelation is the claim an event makes on viewers as an event that exerts a fundamental change, breaking into the viewer's world by two orders of reality drawing near to one another. Dürer used the smoky clouds to set off such moments of encounter (see, for instance, his title page of the Apocalypse, the Birth of Mary and the Coronation of the Virgin). His woodcut cycles were full of miraculous moments from scripture and the life of Mary, but the unfurling clouds are only used to highlight events that negotiate the proximity of the two domains before viewers.

Certainly the configuration of past and present or transcendent and immanent will take the form that particular cultural circumstances enable, which means within the terms of the sensory regime that prevails, grounds a particular visual culture, or what Meyer in this volume refers to as the 'specific, socially situated visual regimes, including those offered by religious traditions across time and space' (Meyer 85).⁴ In the case of Dürer's sixteenth-century work, unfolding on the cusp of late medieval European Roman Catholic visual piety and early modern pictorial narrative, revelation is not only represented, but is visually evoked as a visceral empathy that wounds the viewer with shame for being complicit in Christ's suffering. The image mediates in the sense of acting on viewers as an agent of the unseen and being acted upon by viewers. Those who gaze upon the image join the soldier in mocking Christ, evoking a shame that motivates viewer empathy with him. It is a membrane that joins viewers with the biblical subject in an intimate give-and-take that makes human and divine present to one another, bringing them nearer by linking the viewer's body to the body of Jesus. Imagery like Dürer's performs a mimesis between the bodies they portray and the bodies of those who look upon them, thereby enabling beholders to imagine in corporeal immediacy the deity who suffers for and with them.