

The Role of Images from the Perspective of Natural Theology

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The role of images in the religions of the book is a well-researched topic in the case of Judaism (but see here the revolutionary new study by David Gelernter¹), and especially in the case of Christianity, where the two main issues are how the invisible can be represented by the visible, and whether pictures can serve as a *biblia pauperum* – that is, whether they can convey the scriptural narrative to the unlettered. In his 1802 classic on natural theology, Paley comes to say that since the contemplation of divine nature "overwhelms our faculties", we seek "from painful abstraction ... relief in sensible images", and might thereby fall into idolatry, a danger which revelation helps us to avoid: if the authority of the text is observed, "a condescension to the state of our faculties" can be afforded.² In allotting to imagery but an accessory function, Paley is prey to a false philosophy of mind. As Aristotle taught, "the soul never thinks without an image (*phantasma*)",³ and as Aquinas elaborated, "incorporeal things, of which there are no phantasms, are known to us by comparison with sensible bodies of which there are phantasms".⁴ By the time of Paley, the insight that ideas might have something to do with mental images, and that inner and outer images work in concert with each other, was all but lost, making a brief reappearance in Newman's imagery-centred notion of "real assent",⁵ a notion having as little impact as H. H. Price's analyses of the latter had in his 1960 Giffords, ninety years later.⁶ Contemporary work in natural theology has use neither for images, nor for mental imagery. Aquinas's theory of phantasmata is entirely rejected by Swinburne;⁷ the move from phantasmata to imagery is only half-heartedly made by Kretzmann;⁸ and the part played by visual images in religious experience is found to be insignificant by Alston.⁹

However, as I will attempt to show in my talk, it is precisely at the level of non-revealed religion that the role of images, inner and outer, turns out to be essential. In accord with much of today's cognitive psychology, and based in part on my earlier work on Wittgenstein, I will assume that thinking is both a verbal and a perceptual process, with the per-

¹ David Hillel Gelernter, *Judaism: A Way of Being*, New Haven: Yale University Press, Nov. 2009.

² William Paley, *Natural Theology: Or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1802), 12th edition, London: Printed for J. Faulder, 1809, pp. 442 f.

³ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 431a, transl. by J. A. Smith. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

⁴ *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Quest. 84, Art. 7.

⁵ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1870, Chapter 4.

⁶ H. H. Price, *Belief* (the 1959–1961 Gifford Lectures, held in Aberdeen), London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969, Lecture 5.

⁷ Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (1992), 2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 227.

⁸ In his *The Metaphysics of Creation: Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles II*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.

⁹ William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (1991), Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993.

ceptual dimension being primary.¹⁰ Now in religious experience informed by sacred texts, the perceptual – most importantly, the visual – element necessarily tends to be relegated to an inferior position. By contrast, the primordial religious experience focussed on by William James,¹¹ and indeed Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*, "that simple and primitive knowledge, to which the mere course of nature would have conducted us, had Adam stood upright",¹² essentially involves specific modes of seeing-as, specific images of the world surrounding us, mental imagery, and images and statues as artifacts. It is the nature and varieties of such images that my talk will explore.

¹⁰ See my papers "The Picture Theory of Reason", in Berit Brogaard – Barry Smith, eds., *Rationality and Irrationality*, Wien: öbv hpt, 2001, pp. 242–266; "Pictures as Instruments in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein", in Rudolf Haller – Klaus Puhl, eds., *Wittgenstein and the Future of Philosophy: A Reassessment after 50 Years*, Wien: öbv&hpt, 2002, pp. 328–336; "Pictorial Meaning and Mobile Communication", in Kristóf Nyíri, ed., *Mobile Communication: Essays on Cognition and Community*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003, pp. 157–184. A passage from this latter paper: "Saint Bonaventure in the thirteenth century summed up a millennium of argument about the institution of images in the Church when he said, first, that the illiterate might learn from sculptures and from pictures as if from books, and second, that people who are not excited to devotion when they hear of Christ's deeds might at least be excited when they see them in figures and pictures. (I here follow David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 162 ff.) The essential fact behind both observations of course is that understanding images, thinking in images, having feelings in connection with images, and even communicating in images – namely in mimetic patterns – is more basic to human nature than thinking and communicating in words."

¹¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (The Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901–1902), London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902.

¹² John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1599), transl. by Henry Beveridge, Chapter 2.