

# *Iconic Presence: Images in Religion*

**Hans Belting**

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Hans Belting is Emeritus Professor for Art History and Media Theory at the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe. His project concerns the central role of images in religions and the significance of material practice in religion, which have become major topics in the field of religious studies as a result of notions like “Iconic Religion” (a project at the University Bochum), “Visible Religion” (the title of a journal of the 1980s at the University Groningen), or “mediation and genesis of presence” (Birgit Meyer, 2012 inaugural lecture, University of Utrecht). Hans Belting’s own attention to notions of Likeness and Presence (as in the title for the English edition of *Bild und Kult*) make a claim for enforced presence, as was the case with the use of very old or miraculous images in the Christian religion.

The iconic production and ritual enactment of images differ significantly between different religions, and focus the gaze on the specific nature and history of each. Likewise, the contemporary significance of religion differs from culture to culture. Therefore, the modern experience of religion, which derives from the Enlightenment, must be re-evaluated in order to understand images in religions other than Christianity. Anthropology has usually been considered the appropriate field for such topics.

Today a paradigm shift has also affected our own culture in a global context. The so-called “pre-modern” history of Europe, when religion definitely played a more important role than today, must also be reformulated. The Eurocentric prejudice

which was developed in colonial times and strengthened during missionary activity in other cultures mainly applies to Christian theology, which cast a paternalistic gaze on non-Christian or colonial forms of religion for a long time. Thus an anthropological discussion instead of a theological one must be initiated.

In religions, the evidence of images has a profile of its own since images must be able to represent or give presence to what is not available to the human gaze. Time and again, the collective power of such images over the imagination has been questioned. Each instance of iconoclasm has caused a debate about true or false images (the latter considered as idols). The prohibition of images which played such an important role in Judaism and Islam reveals a fear of being betrayed by images and manipulated by ideology. Aniconism is also a (negative) iconic theory caused by suspicion against the ontology inherent in images. However, the search for a “true image” of Christ in late antiquity reveals the lack of an authentic “prophetic” *Urtext* in religion. Islam has responded with a verbal revelation in the Qur’an.

A very different situation is presented by the modern era, when the specific evidence of religious images suddenly suffered a loss of legitimacy. This may also be seen as the legacy of the Renaissance concept of art. Today, we are confronted with the existence of other iconic cultures which in the field of iconology challenge the closed European horizon and also affect our theoretical stance with its hegemonic universalism. Contemporary worldwide art production also questions the western monopoly on the concept of art.

## **RESEARCH PROGRAM**

The funds of the Balzan Prize offer support to young scholars to do research on images and to involve literary or cultural studies as well as religious studies. For this purpose, Hans Belting has initiated cooperative programmes with three different institutions which will address the project from their different perspectives.

In the Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft in Berlin (ZfL), the former director, Sigrid Weigel, is a partner in the project. Renowned for her work in image theory, she has recently published *Grammatologie der Bilder* (Suhrkamp 2015). The subject of religion is well established at the ZfL, as can be seen by the work of Martin Tremml. A postdoctoral position (50%) for three years will have the task

of cooperating with the two other institutions in organizing conferences, seminars, and publications.

Secondly, the programme Research Group Evidence of Images has been instituted at the Free University in Berlin, where Belting is an elected Fellow. The Berlin project is directed by the art historian Klaus Krüger, who is known in the field of image theory and for his recently published book on religion and art, *Gratia und Grazia*. A PhD position (50%) for three years will serve to coordinate research in conjunction with the other two institutions.

The third institution is the Center for Medieval Studies in the *Seminar dejin umeni* (art history) at the Czech Masaryk University in Brno, where art historian Ivan Foletti, editor of the international journal *Convivium* and lecturer at Brno and at the University of Lausanne, will act as head of the project. He has recently published the book *Zona liminare, Il narcece di Santa Sabina a Roma* (Viella 2015). A postdoctoral position (100%) with emphasis on late Antiquity and the Middle Ages in East and West will help to broaden the perspective of the project in the spatial and temporal sense.