

"The (theological) Aesthetics of the Image"

This seminar will explore primary and critical writings related to the contested role of images in philosophical theology and –aesthetics, and also in some nineteenth-century literature. Rather than approaching the image from the perspective of art history, our objective is to trace how, beginning in late antiquity, images have functioned and how their role has been conceptualized, first in religious practice and philosophical theology, and more recently in literature, philosophy, aesthetic theory, and phenomenology.

At this time in history, Western culture is arguably awash in images to a degree never before experienced. Digital culture has made every image and visual artifact virtually accessible to a vast number of individuals in the developed and developing worlds. Elaborate databases such as ArtStor and Oxford Art Online, as well as general-purpose search engines (Google Images) facilitate the retrieval of visual materials with very little censorship or accountability interposing itself on the part of the provider or end-user, respectively. At the same time, the capacity of images (cartoons, photographs, paintings) to unleash public controversy by tapping into otherwise submerged religious, political, or cultural energies and antagonisms seems undiminished. More than most textual forms—whose impact is typically attenuated by the hermeneutic demands that their linear and propositional presentation makes on readers—images seem uniquely capable of bypassing or suspending a more guarded and reflexive interpretive appraisal. The traumatic force with which the images of the falling Twin Towers on September 11, 2001 impacted and shaped the political imaginary of an entire generation of people in the United States and the Western world, or similarly iconic moments such as Robert Capra's famous photo of a soldier's death during the Spanish Civil War, Nick Ut's photo of a young Vietnamese child burned by napalm, Charlie Cole's 1989 snapshot of a young man in a white shirt blocking the advance of tanks in Tiananmen Square, Kurt Westergaard's 2005 cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed—all attest to the image's undiminished capacity for concentrating and unleashing vast reservoirs of moral and political energy.

It cannot surprise, then, that political and religious establishments around the world are far more preoccupied with controlling (or even expunging) images than with articulating a coherent message or rationally engaging their perceived opponents. Among the more egregious instances of such practice might be the Afghan Taliban's March 2001 decision to detonate the early sixth-century Buddhas of Bamiyan, or the G. W. Bush administration's ban on releasing photos of the coffins of dead soldiers flown back from Iraq. – So as to understand the deeper histories that resonate in such controversies, and indeed set the formal and moral parameters for them, this seminar will seek to undertake an archeology of the image in its various dimensions: viz., as material object, as a medium (often in close competition with text), as formal-aesthetic artifact, and as the correlate of a distinctive kind of human intentionality.

PART I of our seminar will explore the role of the image (and of intelligible beauty) in Plotinus (*Enn.* I.6 and V.8), John of Damascene, and in the iconoclastic debates that span from 726-846 A.D. Our readings here will focus on St. John Damascene and St. Theodore the Studite. We will also take a brief leap into the modern era to consider the (ironic) reappearance of iconoclastic fervor in T. Mann's short story "Gladius Dei." – Since that debate ended not only with the defeat of the iconoclasts but also with the expurgation of their arguments from the record, we will move on to consider the resurgent debate during the Reformation (with particular emphasis on England). Our readings here will likely include short selections (on average 10-12 pp.) from the following works: More, *Dialogue Concerning Tyndale* (1529), I.ii, I.iii, and IV.ii; Tyndale, *Answer to More* (1531) (extract), fols. xxxv – xxxviii; Nicholas Ridley, 'Treatise on the Worship of Images' in Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*; Martin Bucer, *Against Images* (1535); John Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), Bk. 1, ch. 11; George Salteren, *Treatise Against Images* (1641); *Orders from the House of Commons for the Abolishing of Superstition* (1641); George Fox, *Iconoclastes* (1671); Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (1645) – 170 pages in the 1709 English translation.

PART II of our seminar will take up the nineteenth century's reengagement with the image as the source and manifestation of transcendent (non-discursive) meanings. It is above all the serious concern with *mediation*—both in philosophy and theology—that prompts writers as dissimilar as Hegel, Ruskin, and Hopkins to move toward a phenomenology of givenness that in our time has been richly articulated in the work of Jean-Luc Marion. Our readings here will begin short selections from Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1822) and his *Aesthetics* (1821/1822), in which the "Protestant" philosopher confronts the intrinsic poverty of a secularization narrative with which he was then (and in some quarters is even now) being identified. In Hegel's oeuvre, it is the pivotal role of *mediation* (*Vermittlung*) that prompts a reexamination of the image as it bears on both the "Absolute" and "the ethical life" (*das sittliche Leben*). Another quick foray will take us into Coleridge's *Statesman's Manual* (1816), which conceives of image and symbol as the unique "translucence" of a (divine) logos that cannot be captured in propositional form but, in fact, is always presupposed by the discursive intellect. The closing four sessions will be dedicated on the journals and poetry of G. M. Hopkins. Here we can trace the beginnings of modern phenomenology, which, beginning with Husserl and extending all the way to Jean-Luc Marion's recent work, focuses on the image as a unique phenomenological datum. Some selections from Husserl's 1905 lectures on "Image Consciousness" (*Bildbewusstsein*) and Jean-Luc Marion on the "absolute givenness" of the "saturated phenomenon" will help us trace how nineteenth-century literary, aesthetic, and philosophical reflection engages the image in its own terms, rather than measuring it (positively or negatively) against a textual and discursive model of representation. Other critical literature that will be interspersed with our primary text readings will include selections from H. G. Gadamer, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Marie-Jose Mondzain, Edmund Husserl, Alain Besançon, David Freedberg, and W. J. T. Mitchell.