



In the Beginning is the Icon

A Liberative Theology of
Images, Visual Arts and Culture

Sigurd Bergmann



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Translated by Anja K. Angelsen

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Foreword

Sigurd Bergmann's *In the Beginning Is the Icon* is a breakthrough in theological aesthetics, or as he sometimes calls it, art theology. Most writers on theological aesthetics have their eye on high art of the West, some of this being art that originated in the West, some of it art that we in the West have appropriated from other societies for our own purposes. The writer then reflects on the theological significance of this art, employing his or her own theology in doing so. It is of little or no interest to the writer how those who originally made and engaged the art understood what they had made and how they were engaging it.

In place of this way of doing theological aesthetics, Bergmann proposes, and begins to practice, what he calls *contextual art theology*. Bergmann frames his proposal in terms of images; but the significance of his proposal extends beyond images to all the arts.

Contextual image theology is contextual in two respects. It is, for one thing, contextual in its approach to images. Of course, traditional theological aesthetics is also, in a way, contextual in its approach to images. The point is that it limits its concern to just one context, that which consists of what Theodor Adorno called "engrossed contemplation." Fundamental to the approach that Bergmann is proposing is that we liberate ourselves from our myopic concern with this one context and

open our eyes to the diversity of ways in which human beings engage images – not just the diversity of ways in which modern Westerners engage images, but the diversity of ways in which human beings in general do so.

This proposal leads Bergmann into an informed and very helpful summary of the various approaches by anthropologists to the role of images in so-called primitive societies. Though naturally he finds some of these approaches more helpful than others, eventually he concludes that none of them can simply be taken over for the purpose of developing a contextual art theology. All of the anthropological approaches to images are, in the last resort, components within some larger anthropological theory; they are not aimed at illuminating the context in which these images were originally made and engaged. By contrast, "image theology...must always base and centre its interpretation in and around the physical and historical images in their context."

As the corollary of a contextual approach to images, Bergmann proposes a contextual approach to theology. Theology emerges in many different contexts, one of these being the academic context. For those of us who are members of the academy in the modern West, this is our context; this is the context within which we engage in theological reflection. Hence it is no surprise that the theology

employed by the practitioners of theological aesthetics has almost always been academic theology of the modern West. In proposing a contextual art theology, Bergmann is proposing that we instead attend to the theology-in-context of those who originally made and engaged the images that we are studying. What was *their* theology? How did they understand God and God's activity in the world?

With images and theology both approached contextually, the project of a contextual art theology is then to illuminate how the theological convictions of those who originally made and engaged these images comes to expression in those images and in the way they were engaged. In Bergmann's own words, "How is God represented sensuously –corporeally

visually through the image-making and reception processes in the physical works of art? How do these artefacts interpret God? How do we sense and understand God's liberating actions in images?" In his final chapter, Bergmann goes beyond merely proposing this approach and culminates his discussion by taking images from a variety of times and places, and vividly showing what contextual art theology actually looks like in practice.

Nicholas Wolterstorff
Noah Porter Professor Emeritus of
Philosophical Theology, Yale University
Senior Fellow, Institute for Advanced
Studies in Culture, University of Virginia



Preface

“To sense art, to experience art, and to perform art is immensely more important than reflecting over art,” exclaims the Spanish painter Antoni Tapies.¹

Why write about visual arts? And why write about images and art in relation to religious belief, a world that traditionally has been ruled by the written word, both within the church and academia?

Based on the assumption that human beings create and carry the world through external and internal images, it is hard to understand why reflections on the creation of images are not a central component of reflections on humanity and religion. Is the Western culture² – in spite of the flood of mass-produced images – still antagonistic to images?

Tapies’ positive valuation of creative art did not render it a devaluation, but rather a revaluation of art reflection. The origin of art is the work of art itself. Aesthetics should not be a normative theory that restrains the freedom of creation.

The aim of this book is to contribute to the development of a sensitive theory that supports and preserves the intrinsic value of image creation and creative power. To provide a contrast to the traditional narrow focus on language within religious studies and theology, the main focus will be on the challenge of visual culture for “life interpretation.”³

A narrow methodological approach would be a presumptuous and, for the purpose of this book, destructive pursuit. The encounter between visual arts and religion must necessarily take place in an open space with room for development, and thus the reader will have to accept a number of loose ends. A certain element of unpredictability and reluctance toward developing a unified theory is part of the author’s conscious analytical method, even though some researchers, in order to protect the integrity of their academic discipline, may argue that this methodological approach is in fact a “lack” of method.⁴ The aim of iconology is not to establish universal truths, but rather to be a tool for articulating and interpreting visual experiences. Therefore, in this book I urge for sensibility and a certain critical distance to “the order of things” (Foucault), which hopefully may inspire others to continue creatively the open reflections of the book.

The main objective of the book is to explore a field of research that has yet to come into existence. The discursive space of this field should incorporate and develop perspectives from fields that are unrelated or only remotely related. Reflections from iconology, art theory, philosophical aesthetics, art history, and the fairly recent field of anthropology of art intersect with reflections from systematic theology and religious studies.

Needless to say, this is a vulnerable and haphazard venture, as the author cannot claim expert knowledge within all these fields of study. Nonetheless, in a problematically complex and differentiated knowledge context, I find it of utmost importance to spend one's energy on synthetic enterprises.

The book can be regarded as a kind of literary exhibition of various approaches to the theme of "God in pictures" (in continuity with my monograph on "God in Context," 2003). From the very outset I wish to share the duty of synthesis and integration in this novel field with the observant reader, without whom no picture or book have a function.

In addition to the establishment of an open, interdisciplinary field of study, the current proposal also includes a normative ambition. Unlike the well-established philosophical aesthetics and the intent of the old Western Church to reduce visual arts to an expression of logocentric constructions or to mere illustrations of biblical readings and religious dogmas, the normative intention is developed by an aesthetic of production and reception. Whoever asks whether this book represents a theoretical and methodological innovation should look for the answer in the author's intention to set the discursive interpretation of what is seen in close connection with the visual experience of the image and the memory of this experience. A logocentric projection of the spectator onto the picture will be replaced with a reflection over the dynamics of the relationship between the artefact, its creator, and its spectator, partly in the same and partly in different contexts.

A central question is how God, through human creation and observation of pictures, can have a liberating function in images. Within the context of a liberation theological

approach to the interpretation of God and an aesthetic that focuses on the love of the poor, the final chapter develops a constructive proposal for a contextual art theology. In the globalized mass production of pictures, the pedagogy of art and iconology has a special significance in contributing to the humanization and liberation of men and women.⁵ The roles of the hand and the eye for learning make up central and crucial notions within liberation pedagogy.⁶ The extended time period that is needed to orientate in the visual sphere is in itself a political counterforce to the violation of natural space and a natural passing of time caused by the acceleration of technological developments.⁷

In light of the impact of both art and religion within a world of geographical and historical relations, and with a critical edge toward Western art reflection and the egocentric, Eurocentric character of religious studies, the chapter about "world art" widens the perspective of the book. Even though the research history of ethnography and anthropology also reflects this ethnocentricity shared by art and religious studies, the newly established anthropology of art offers important perspectives for a cross-cultural theology of art.

In light of the history of religion and church history, there are many good reasons for using passion and foresight in the development of the meeting between the ideas of images and art and the Christian interpretation of life. Some of these reasons are listed below.

- In accordance with the superior position of the spoken and written word over pictorial depictions within the history of Western culture; religious and Christian studies have also suffered from a biased focus on words

and texts. The crucial importance of art for the shaping of the religious worldview, first and foremost among the non-literate religious devout, which was well known among medieval theologians, is no longer appreciated. One important challenge is to regard images as “locus theologicus,”⁸ as a place where God acts and where the human experience with God becomes manifest in an autonomous medium.

- With regards to the history of Christianity, the theological interpretation of images has a common ecclesiastical and philosophical ground closely related to Jewish and Hellenistic approaches. While the Western Church developed a more catechetic iconology, in which images generally were perceived as positive, albeit in a reductionist sense as illustrations to the Holy Scripture and the written dogmas of theologians, the Eastern Church developed a more ontological theology of icons, in which the intrinsic value of the visual media is recognized. Within Protestant contexts, a more pragmatic, and theologically less well-founded, approach was adopted, situated between the two extremities of image ban and icon worship. There is an urgent need for ecumenical reflection over the inter-confessional historical similarities and divisions of a theology of images and its future ethical potential in a globalized and secularized world system, although such reflection can only be hinted at in this book.
- The various sub-disciplines of Christian and religious studies alike have spent little effort on establishing a reflection over the importance of image creation and the ideas of images on biblical studies, church history, and systematic theology. The consequences

of this biased text focus is an irresponsible distance to the non-verbal dimensions of belief and the artefacts of everyday culture and the world of the devout. Thus an entire reality dimension remains hidden.

- The history of Christianity has created a huge number of pictures, sculptures and buildings through which artists have interpreted Christian faith, worldview and culture. Not until the nineteenth century did art and theology become disengaged. Theologians retired to an increasingly secluded sphere and public translation of reality was handed over to natural scientists and artists. In modern society, art is created autonomously, even if it retains a living metaphysics, unlike the natural sciences and technology, which believe they operate on neutral ethical grounds.
- Visual arts represent an intuitive *and* rational interpretation of reality, which deserves the designation science.⁹ In Western society, art studies are included in academia, even though its epistemological potential is far from being adequately examined.

The visual arts express perspectives on the context of culture, environment, and society in a way that makes visible and transcends prevailing patterns of perception. Art elucidates and illuminates problems and processes reflexively. Furthermore, it involves a great deal of experimental urge and play, and hereby art earns a normative frankness which functions as a constant corrective to the threatening cultural rigidity.

The expressions of art, and especially the expressions of pictorial art, visualize life- and worldviews. They shape the system of norms

and signs, often with a surprisingly sophisticated level of religious wisdom, knowledge, and consciousness.

- Within hermeneutics and theology, F. Schleiermacher, for example, assumes that images are part of all thinking.¹⁰ In the tradition from Augustine, every insight is manifested through signs. Images cannot be dominated by words. Augustine made a distinction between, on the one hand, the original relation, for example equality (*aequalitas*), and, on the other hand, similar nature (*similitudo*). In a religious philosophical perspective, images can be perceived as having a dual function. The image can bear certain similarities to something (*similitudo*) and it can be exactly like something (*aequalitas*). The image both partly refers to, and partly bears an inherent resemblance to, something that goes beyond that to which one may establish a reference. In modern times, the religious philosophical reflection over the significance of image has obviously lost the historical continuity.
- Pictorial works of art visualize the inevitable problem of their contemporary context, to which the Christian life interpretation with its special preconditions should contribute.¹¹
- Visual arts offer alternative courses of action that can make a strong contribution to the Christian Church. In a society dominated by an instrumental goal-orientation, the futile creativity of art represents a critique of this rationality and makes a contribution to a new, balanced form of rationality. The creation of art can be perceived as an expression of a practical-aesthetical and

critical common sense. The freedom of art is an essential component of art, a feature it shares with theology.

- In the so-called Third and Fourth Worlds, ever since the breakthrough of modernity in the First World, visual arts have had a very important role in arts' critical perspective on the way of life of the industrial world. World art is at present in a very dynamic development chain within which a new sign system for communication between artists in the different worlds is emerging. A natural question is how this inter- and transcultural art process relates to the dynamic contextual theology.

The book is organized according to the discourses introduced above.

What is an image? This is the first issue to be discussed. Through a selection of iconological perspectives, the reader with a background in religious studies and theology will be introduced to an interpretation perspective that focuses on the intrinsic power of the image. The selection here is not exhaustive, but by no means is it arbitrary.¹² There is no way by which a theological approach to art can do justice to the visual aspect of human nature, if the theologian does not first acquire a well-reflected attitude and methodology in relation to the world of images and to the creation of images, its gaze and interpretation which is intrinsically related to the experience of images.

What is art? This is the topic of discussion in Chapter 2, where a brief outline of the treatment of art within the context of the Western history of ideas is presented.¹³ The philosophical-aesthetical programme of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which

presents the dominating view of fine arts in the Western hemisphere, is discussed in more detail. Finally, there is a critical comment on the breakdown of theo-aesthetics, that is, art theory in which the nature of art is fundamentally based on a theological metaphysic.

The third chapter takes close stock of the view of art within the twentieth-century history of religion and theology. Following an exposition of four crucial elements that pose a challenge of a well-founded theology of visual art, nine different approaches within theology and religious history are presented. The nine approaches are subject to critical examination, and the weaknesses and strengths of the various approaches are presented in light of four models for art theology.

Chapter 4 includes an inventory of approaches to the nature and function of art in culture within cultural and social anthropology. A retrospective view on the incorporation of the art expressions of so-called primitive people in the modernist tradition of the early twentieth century is followed by a comprehensive and critical discussion of three different traditions within the anthropology of art. The question of how anthropology relates to the issue of the cultural function and the autonomy of art is the common denominator for these three approaches.

Finally, the loose ends from the first four chapters are woven together to form a proposal for a contextual theology of art. The literary style of this chapter differs from the rest of the book by apportioning the art reproductions and readers' encounters with the images, as well as allowing the author's interpretation and mindset a more autonomous role. Different criteria for a contextual art theology are outlined in seven steps – an art theology which develops the requirement to contribute to an

aesthetic of liberation in harmony with the new contextual paradigm of theology. The ancient Eastern Church's enlightened reflections about God's trinity and the life- and space-giving work of the Holy Spirit embed this theology in the continuity and harmony of the classic Christian tradition.

The aim of this book is to contribute to raising awareness about the intrinsic value of images and image perception among those who wish to reflect over God and over pictorial expressions of different experiences from encounters with divinity in earthly and historical situations. It is my hope that the book will appeal to the eyes, intuitions, and thoughts of theologians and academics within religious studies and theology. But I also hope that artists and researchers within art and culture studies may benefit from the religious perspective on visual arts, and that the openness connected to the target audience of the book may in itself contribute to a further cultivation of the expanded, open field of study.

The fruits on the tree of knowledge have not ripened in isolation. I express my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has contributed in a critical and constructive manner to the growth of the tree: students at courses on aesthetics/visual arts and theology at the Department of Religious Studies in Göteborg, where the two first chapters of the book developed; the research seminar in Social Anthropology at Lund University; the research seminar in Religious Studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim; the Department of Teacher Training at the University College of Arts Crafts and Design, Stockholm; Per Erik Persson, Lund, and Carola Envall, Åbo, for a critical examination of the entire text; Anja Angelsen, Trondheim, for

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What Is an Image?

“In the Beginning Was the Image...”

“In the beginning was the image...” is the title of a painting by Asger Jorn. The painting was made outdoors in Munich in 1965.¹ (See colour plate section, Image 1.)

Colours pour over the image. The colour flow deforms the figures. The eye hollows, cheeks, and the wing stroke still appear in our vision. There is no external structure – only the fish, the human, and the mask. To the right, we see within the plaise a plastic face with protruding eyes and fat lips. Centre and left, two flying figures glide towards the fish-shaped body. At the bottom, we see three masks with deformed but still recognizable expressions. At the far right, there is a slightly astonished spectator to the event.

The painting lacks symmetry; it places great demands on the viewer, who must create unity and inner structure. The colour shades and the eruptive movements tie the seemingly opposing and random parts together.

It seems futile to approach this painting through words. The image works independent of language. It exists *prior* to language. “Images are created before words and are independent of words,” Jorn wrote in another context.² The painting illustrates how vision unquestionably must precede all thinking and all interpretation. To the extent that it is at all

possible to extract any meaning from this very expressive painting, one cannot transfer this meaning to an imaginary world beyond the visual world. The interpretation of an image of this sort will always be based in its lucidity and sensuous nature. It will not let thought escape the power of vision.

The title of the painting is not arbitrarily chosen. In his powerful civilization criticism, Jorn in part attacks science’s conception of nature’s rationality – which he contrasts to the natural order of artistic intuition – and in part the renaissance conception of the decisive meaning of geometry and symmetry.³

His images do not come from the real, external world but from a subjective experience of an inner world. It is this inner world that is directly expressed in the eruption of colour and light from which the shapes slowly emerge.

Jorn does not regard the subjective as individually autonomous, but he keeps searching for the collective universal phenomena that arise across different cultures. He calls this search “comparative vandalism.”⁴ The painter’s adaptation of the primitive masks does not only involve the import of a visual technique but also, even in the image of creation above, an integrated “total assimilation”⁵: the masks’ gaze and expression become ours.