

Jan Assmann

What's Wrong with Images?

Modernity begins almost 3500 years ago with the prohibition to worship the wrong gods or God in the wrong way. The iconoclastic impulse against false representations is the hallmark of enlightenment, rationality, and modernization. The Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten seems to have been the first in history to get this idea through with considerable force, in the middle of the fourteenth century B.C., by abolishing the entire Egyptian pantheon, closing the temples and feasts, and firing the priests. In Egypt, this move towards modernity stayed an episode of at most twenty years but in Israel, with Moses, it gained ground with consequences that eventually changed the world more radically than any political or technological revolution. Until then, mankind lived in fear of neglecting any important deity; now, the much greater fear seized them to worship false gods and to fall into idolatry or heresy. The revolutionary idea of religious falsehood, of false gods and wrong religion, finds its clearest and most radical expression in the second commandment: thou shalt not make for thyself any graven image. The "graven image" is the paramount and symbol of wrong religion.

The prohibition of images and its underlying distinction between truth and falsehood means the beginning of the era of western modernity in which we are still living. But what could have been its original meaning? Why forbid images? What's wrong with them, in the eyes of God? And what do we learn about the concept of "image" from the fact that God forbids the making and the worshipping of them? Let us first recall the text of the commandment:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those

who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The prohibition of images is the only commandment that receives an explanation. Thou shalt not make thyself images because God is jealous and he distinguishes between his foes, the image-worshippers, and his friends who abstain from worshipping images. Images rouse the jealousy of God because they attract worship and thus distract men from exclusively worshipping God who does not tolerate any other gods beside him. God considers images to be other gods and thus rivals.

The text does not refer to specific images, i.e. cult-images of other gods, but to images of whatsoever. Every image that represents something counts as another god that rouses God's jealousy. We must not forget that we are here in a world, to quote Hans Belting, "before the age of art." Images are not made for aesthetic pleasure, for decoration and embellishment, but for worship. Worship is the only *raison d'être* for the production of images. Moreover, we are in an enchanted world, a world full of gods. In this world of divine immanence, every image has the power to turn into a god. Images are prohibited because they are all too powerful: they enchant or divinize the world. To prohibit the production of images, therefore, means *to prohibit the adoration of the visible world*. The visible world in its shapes and forms must not be adored and in order to avoid this mistake, it must not be represented in images. The composer Arnold Schönberg, when working on his opera *Moses and Aaron*, has given a very convincing interpretation of this aspect of the second commandment. Images, he writes, are false gods. I quote first in German and then try an English translation:

*Ein falscher Gott ist in allem enthalten, das uns umgibt, er kann so aussehen wie alles, er entspringt allem, alles entspringt ihm; er ist wie die ganze umgebende Natur und diese ist in ihm, wie in allem enthalten. Dieser Gott ist der*

*Ausdruck einer Naturverehrung und setzt jedes Lebewesen Gott gleich.*

[There is a false god in everything that surrounds us; he can look like everything, he originates in everything, everything originates in him; he is like the entire surrounding nature and nature is in him as in everything. This god expresses the worship of nature and identifies every living creature with God.]

There is, however, yet another explanation of the prohibition of images in the Bible that gives it a very different meaning. This explanation is to be found in the book of Deuteronomy: "Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves ..." (Deuteronomy 4:15–16) God is invisible. Therefore, he cannot be worshiped in anything visible, be it an image or a heavenly body. It is interesting to note that images are here given the same status as sun and moon and stars. The visible forms, especially the heavenly bodies, are given to the other nations as objects of worship. They are the gods of the others and must not be worshiped by Israel who has acquired a special status where anything visible is banished from communication with God.

This explanation does not refer indifferently to images whatsoever but only to images of God. Jahwe, the god of Israel, must not be represented in an image because he is invisible. Here, the prohibition of images is not so much a matter of loyalty, of not worshiping other gods, but of not worshiping God in the wrong way. Both meanings amount to a rejection of, or an exodus from, the enchanted world. In the first meaning, it is man who is called upon to extract himself from the pitfalls of world enchantment by abstaining from image-making; in the second meaning, it is God himself who is emancipated from any intra-mundane

representability. Let us keep these two meanings apart by calling the first one political, because it is a matter of loyalty and commitment, and the second one theological, because it is based on a theological statement: the invisibility of God.

The first meaning is supported by the context, not only because the prohibition of images is a commentary on the prohibition of other gods, but also because it is followed by an explanation stressing the jealousy of God and his distinction between friend and foe:

... for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

This is an unequivocally political commentary. God resents the making of images as an act of defection and apostasy. This shows the political meaning of images to be at least originally the dominant interpretation. The prohibition of images divides the world into two parties: the idolaters and the iconoclasts, the first being the enemies and the second being the friends of God. The second, the theological interpretation, is supported by Deuteronomy's emphasis on the invisibility of God. Images are, thus, forbidden for two reasons: a) because every image represents a (false) god. This is a question of loyalty. Images are other gods and provoke God's jealousy; b) because no image is able to represent the invisible God. This is a question of God's nature. Given the invisibility of God, image is the wrong medium to establish a contact with the divine.

The concept of medium leads us to a next step. If images are the wrong medium, is there an alternative? Is there a right medium of establishing a contact with God, or does the prohibition of images throw us into an abyss of negative theology?

This second possibility was, in fact, the position of Schönberg, who, in his opera *Moses and Aaron*, interprets the prohibition of images in an extremely radical way. Moses condemns not only the Golden Calf, but the whole Bible as an image, "wrong as an image can be." His Moses despairs at the end of the communicability of any idea of God, not only through images but also through words. He collapses with the cry: *O Wort, Du Wort, das mir fehlt!* [O word, you word that I miss.]

This radical position of negative theology, however, by no means corresponds to what the Bible intends by the prohibition of images. The Bible luxuriates in verbal images of God and these are obviously fully admitted. There is nothing wrong with language. Schönberg calls God not only invisible but also *unimaginable*. This does not correspond to the biblical view. On the contrary, imagination is everything. The biblical texts constantly invite us to imagine God, to form mental images of God in order to love him, to fear him, to obey him. The visible images must disappear in order to make room for the word and the mental images it evokes. "Where image is shall Torah be"—where Torah is to be, images must disappear. However, the path to negative theology is paved by the second commandment. As its ultimate consequence it leads to rejecting not only material but even mental images of God.

Between the two meanings of the prohibition of images, the political and the theological, lies a shift in religious orientation that may be described as a shift from monolatry to monotheism. Monolatry means the exclusive worship of only one god in a world supposed to be full of other gods. Monotheism, on the other hand, recognizes only one God and negates the existence of other gods. In the context of monolatry, images are forbidden because they constitute other gods and their cult amounts to apostasy. In the context of monotheism, they are forbidden

because their visibility precludes any contact with the true invisible God. The theological explanation that is given in Deuteronomy 4 belongs to a later stratum of the text when Israel has already made the move from monolatry to monotheism.

Let us now have a look at what may be counted as the “primal scene” of idolatry, the forbidden worship of images, the story of the Golden Calf as told in Exodus chapter 32. Moses climbed on top of Mount Sinai and stayed there for forty days. The people, despairing of Moses's return, asked Aaron to replace the absent representative of God by a representation: “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” Aaron acquiesced to their demand and fashioned the Golden Calf. “And they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” (Exodus 32:1–4)

Meanwhile, Moses, on Mount Sinai, is warned by God that the people are committing great crimes. God wants to destroy the people and to found with Moses another one, but Moses prevails on God to forgive and to give his people a second chance. However, when Moses returned and saw the people dancing, he fell into a rage: “. . . he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.”

What could be the meaning of grounding and diluting the Golden Calf and of making the people swallow it? Eating the sacred animals is—in the Egyptian imaginary—the worst religious crime possible. Drinking the diluted calf seems the equivalent of eating sacred animals. Again, we meet with the strange power that is attributed to images. Images are treated as sacred animals in the Egyptian sense, not as representations, but as incarnations

of the divine, not as copy of a divine body but as divine bodies themselves.

But this is not enough. Moses also orders a massacre:

... then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, 'Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me.' And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, 'Thus says the LORD God of Israel, "Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.'" And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. (Exodus 32)

The execution of this punishment is presented as a model of "zeal": human zeal and divine jealousy are in Hebrew expressed by the same word *qin'ah*. *El qanna'* means the jealous God, *qana'im* is the denomination of the zealots. Moses and the Levites act as *qana'im* in making themselves tools of God's jealousy. This is what zealot means. The Arabic word for "zeal" is *hamas*. The story teaches that God's distinction between friend and foe prevails over human bonds of kinship and friendship.

The sin of the Golden Calf is not a matter of disloyalty but of false theology. They did not want to leave Jahwe alone and to turn to other gods, but to replace the vanished representative with a representation of god to lead them to Canaan. They wanted the calf as an image of God. This was their mistake. The Golden Calf was not meant to be another god but it turned out to be a false way to God, a false god, dead matter. The God of Israel is not only invisible, he is also trans-mundane. The world of monotheism is disenchanting and de-divinized. In a disenchanting world, images are unable to establish any contact with the divine and turn into mere matter, gold, silver, stone, wood (see, for example, Psalm 115).

We meet here with the concept of paganism, which monotheism constructs as its own counter-image. Unlike monolatry, monotheism draws the distinction between true and false religion and condemns all other religions as false, i.e. pagan. The concept of the jealous God and, thus, the original meaning of the second commandment belongs to the stage of monolatry and does not reject the foreign gods as "false" and the other religions as paganism. They are simply forbidden for Israel. Monotheism, on the other hand, develops a universalist perspective where there is only one true God and where other religions that do not recognize the true God walk in the darkness of paganism. The hallmark of false religion or paganism is idolatry, the worship of images. Other and much longer examples of such invectives against foreign religions are Jeremiah chapter 10, Deutero-Isaiah chapter 44, and Song of Solomon chapters 12–15. These texts give a new answer to our question: What's wrong with images? Images are just helpless matter, pieces of wood or stone without the power to help themselves let alone others.

The ancient Egyptians and Babylonians held, of course, totally different views about the nature and power of images. They distinguished carefully between a statue and a god. An image becomes a medium for establishing a contact with the divine only after complex rites of consecration and investiture, only temporarily, and only within the special, temporal, and social frames of the cult. All this was, of course, well known to Jeremiah, Deutero-Isaiah, and other biblical writers, but they abstracted from this knowledge for the sake of satire. The most explicit theory of the cult-image appears only in a much later Egyptian text, which is written in the third century A.D. in view of rising Christianity: the hermetic treatise of Asclepius. This text devotes several chapters to the statues "animated and conscious, filled with spirit and doing great deeds, statues that foreknow the future and predict it by lots, by prophecy, by dreams and by many other means;

statues, that make people ill and cure them, bringing them pain and pleasure as each deserves."<sup>1</sup> Images are not dead matter but are vessels of divine presence. They provide an interface between the divine and the human worlds, between heaven and earth. "Do you not know," the text continues, "that Egypt is an image of heaven or, to be more precise, that everything governed and moved in heaven came down to Egypt and was transferred there? If truth be told, our land is the temple of the whole world." Images are the means of bringing the divine down and making it dwell in Egypt. Images, in the eyes of those who believe in them (let us call them "iconists"), achieve precisely the same as they prevent in the eyes of the "iconoclasts": making god dwell among the people and ensuring sacred communication. Images and sacred animals are media of divine immanence. Iconoclasm would deprive the world of this divine animation and would turn it into mere inanimate matter, doomed to pollution and decomposition. The hermetic treatise continues by giving a vivid description of what it calls "the old age of the world" (*senectus mundi*). (Asclepius chapters 24–26)<sup>2</sup>

The worship of images is a worship of the cosmos or, to use a word coined in the eighteenth century, "cosmotheism." Images are not mimetic reduplications of visible reality but vessels of the invisible, intra-mundane powers that animate the world from within. In the view of the aniconists, images idolize the world and blind the eyes for looking beyond the world and focusing on the

1 Asclepius chapter 24 in *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*, translated and edited by Brian Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 81.

2 Asclepius chapters 24–26, eds. A.D. Nock & A.J. Festugière (Paris: Collection Budé 1960), pp. 326–329 (with omissions); coptic version: Nag Hammadi Codex VI, 8.65.15–78.43, eds. Martin Krause and Pahor Labib, 1971, pp. 194–200. See also: Carsten

Colpe and Jens Holzhausen, *Das Corpus Hermeticum Deutsch* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1997), vol. I.1, 287f.; Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 39–43; Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, vol. 2 (Québec: Les Presses De L'Université Laval, 1982), pp. 69–97; and David Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt* (London: Trinity Press International, 1993), p. 188f.

creator. Instead of establishing a contact, images block the communication with God whose presence can only be felt like, to quote Stefan George, "air from other planets blowing." For the iconists, the divine is not like air from other planets blowing but the very air that is blowing in this world and that makes it an abode habitable for both men and gods. To the aniconists, this happiness with and within the world as it is appears like blind entanglement. Idolatry means *Weltverstrickung*, entanglement within the world, addiction to the visible and the material.

In the last part of this paper, I propose to have a look at what became of the prohibition of images in occidental Christianity. Christianity readmitted the images, images of the visible and even images of the invisible. With its incarnation in Jesus Christ, the word became visible and left even an imprint on the handkerchief of Veronica whose name means "true image" (*vera icon*). In the history of monotheism, Christianity meant a huge iconic turn. However, the Ten Commandments remained valid and among them the prohibition of images and the incrimination of idolatry. The writings of the church fathers are full of violent invectives against the idolaters. Idolatry is treated as madness, an illness, a kind of addiction, and a satanic performance. The traces of Christian iconoclasm are to be seen everywhere in Egypt. Occidental Christian history is thus informed by a deep conflict between iconism and iconoclasm, between a culture of the word and a culture of the image. After the first iconic turn in late antiquity there was a draw back in the form of Byzantine iconoclasm, which lasted for a century until the conflict was finally solved in favor of images.

A similar wave of iconoclasm occurred with the Reformation. Sculptures, paintings, and even organs were removed from Protestant churches and in large part destroyed. On the other hand, the Reformation led to an enormous boom of word culture,

of writing, printing, and reading, of teaching and preaching, of philology and hermeneutics. With the counter-reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction and we see another iconic turn triumphantly setting in especially in the Catholic countries of the South. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and the beginnings of bourgeois culture, however, show many traits again of an anti-iconic word culture. Until this day, the intellectual history of the West is torn between iconism and iconoclasm, a culture of the image and a culture of the word.

Heinrich Heine gave vivid expression to this double-facedness of European modernity. I'll again give first the quote in German and try an English translation:

*Menschen sind entweder Juden oder Hellenen, Menschen mit asketischen, bildfeindlichen, vergeistigungssüchtigen Trieben oder Menschen von heiterem, entfaltungsstolzem und realistischem Wesen.*<sup>3</sup>

[All people are either Jews or Hellenes, people with ascetic and iconoclastic instincts who are addicted to intellectualizing, or people of a sunny and realistic temperament who take pride in their own organic growth.]

Note the irony: Jewish asceticism is presented as a matter of "instinct" and "addiction," Greek pride and serenity a matter of "temperament."

Sigmund Freud held similar ideas about Judaism and its proneness to spiritualization. In his last book, *Moses and Monotheism*, he outlines his ideas about monotheism as an advance in spirituality or intellectuality, i.e. in "word culture," and sees in the Jewish people the paragon of this movement. The Jews owed this advantage in intellectuality to the prohibition of images, which

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Werke*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1994), p. 350.

forced them to turn away from the sensual and to concentrate on the intellectual:

Among the precepts of the Moses religion there is one that is of greater importance than appears to begin with. This is the prohibition against making an image of god—the compulsion to worship a god whom one cannot see. In this, I suspect, Moses was outdoing the strictness of the Aten religion. Perhaps he merely wanted to be consistent: his god would in that case have neither a name nor a countenance. Perhaps it was a fresh measure against magical abuses. But if this prohibition were accepted, it must have a profound effect. For it meant that a sensory perception was given second place to what may be called an abstract idea—a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality or, strictly speaking, an instinctual renunciation, with all its necessary psychological consequences.<sup>4</sup>

In his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* [Critique of Judgement], Immanuel Kant interpreted the prohibition of images 150 years earlier already in a similar way:

There is perhaps no passage more sublime in the Jewish Law Code than the commandment, 'You shall not make for thyself any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath etc.' This commandment alone is sufficient to explain the enthusiasm which the Jewish people in its more civilized epochs felt for its religion or even that pride which is inspired by Mohamedanism.

In the last decade of the eighteenth century, when Kant wrote his third critique, the "sublime" ranked as the central category of aesthetics. The sublime is the opposite of the beautiful. Whereas the beautiful appeals to the senses and attracts humans to the

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Knopf, 1939), pp. 359–360.

visible and the sensual world, the sublime transcends our sensual and conceptual capabilities of comprehension; it repels the senses and tears humans away from their everyday entanglements, exposing them to the horrors of the unknown and leading to a transformation and “sublimation” of their nature, which reminds us of Freud’s concept of sublimation. This leads to a totally different conception of the power or impotence of images. What’s wrong with images? They lure the mind into sensual attractions and lead to cultural regression.

In his later days, Goethe seems to have fostered similar opinions about images and image-culture. In one of his *Zahme Xenien* he wrote:

*Dummes Zeug kann man viel reden,  
kann es auch schreiben.*

*Wird weder Leib noch Seele töten,  
es wird alles beim Alten bleiben.*

*Dummes aber, vors Auge gestellt,  
hat ein magisches Recht.*

*Weil es die Sinne gefesselt hält,  
bleibt der Geist ein Knecht.*<sup>5</sup>

[Silly stuff may be said enough,  
and may also be written –  
this will kill neither body nor soul,  
nothing will be changed.

Silly stuff, however, put before the eyes,  
raises a magic claim.

Since it keeps the senses enthralled,  
the mind is made a slave.]

<sup>5</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke in 18.Bänden*, vol. 1 (Zürich/ Munich: Artemis, 1977), p. 617.

This sounds as if Goethe were writing in and against the age of television and advertisement. What's wrong with images? Their magic claim. What Goethe calls their "magic claim" is the kind of constraint they are exerting on our imagination as long as they operate outside language and verbal reflection. A verbal statement may be answered by way of rejection, elaboration, modification, or making a counterstatement. But how to answer images? This is precisely what we have to learn in order to escape their magic claim and their power to enslave the mind. The solution seems to be not the prohibition of images but the acquisition of iconic literacy. Novelist Paul Auster once wrote, "The world enters us through our eyes, but we cannot make sense of it until it descends into our mouths."<sup>6</sup> Images and sounds surround and invade us in the form of a largely unconscious sphere. Only by the constant labor of linguistic articulation and formulation are we able to transform at least parts of this sonic and iconic environment into the sphere of consciousness. Only under this condition are even sounds and icons able to function as carriers of meaning and means of world-articulation.

This text is an adapted contribution from a session on *Iconoclasm*, which took place within the discourse program *On Post-Secularism*, part of *The Return of Religion and Other Myths* project.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Auster, *Moon Palace* (New York: Viking, 1989). I owe this quote to Aleida Assmann.