

Christianity and Visualism

by Theodore Plantinga

Is there a Christian prejudice against the visual, or perhaps a set of qualifications concerning the visual? Yes, and it is one of the reasons for my concern about the term worldview. Walter Ong points out that the term worldview has no equivalent in classical or medieval languages. [NOTE 1]

The Christian qualification that needs to be explored actually consists of a number of separate theses and emphases that should be carefully disentangled: (i) the second commandment, (ii) Greek visualism, (iii) words vs. images as means for communication.

(1) The obvious place to begin is with the second commandment and its prohibition of visual images as applied to the worship of God. "You shall not make for yourself a graven 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" (Ex. 20:4-5; no basic difference in the Deut. 5 version). On first reading the commandment seems even more sweeping than the usual interpretation demands. The "you shall not bow down to them" has to be understood as identifying the images forbidden in the first part. Abraham Kuyper maintains that it is permitted to make images or representations of angels. [NOTE 2] This type of approach seems to find support in Deut. 4:15-19, if we take this passage as a further explication of the second commandment ("Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire ..."). Note also Solomon's prayer at the time of the temple dedication: "But will God dwell indeed with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!" (II Chron. 6:18; also I Kings 8:27).

Islam is even stricter than Judaism and Christianity when it comes to the application of the spirit of the second commandment. (The commandment itself is not part of Islamic law or revelation.) This strictness is reflected in Islamic art, which stays away from representation.

In the case of Christianity there is a softening with regard to images in that man is made in the image of God. Moreover, God makes himself concrete and visible via the incarnation in Christ. Hence we do make pictures of Jesus, who "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant ..." (Phil. 2:7).

The proper application of the second commandment is an issue between Roman Catholics and Protestants, as we see from the treatment of this commandment in the Heidelberg Catechism. Question & Answer 98: "But may not images be tolerated in the churches as books for the laity? No; for we must not be wiser than God, who will not have His people taught by dumb images, but by the living preaching of His Word."

Such thinking is the reason for the contrast between the visual ornateness of Catholic churches and worship, on the one hand, and Protestant (especially Calvinist, as in New England) austereness, on the other. Also relevant here is the difference between a cross (as a Protestant icon) and a crucifix, which is favored by Catholics. [NOTE 3]

There is a cerebral and intellectual tendency in Protestantism: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). Moreover, it is significant that Protestantism arose at the time of the spread of printing. It hitched its wagon to the literacy crusade -- hence Luther's translation of the Bible into the everyday German of the time. One way to understand Christian education in the Protestant context is to regard it as the promotion and practice of the ideal that every believer is competent to read and understand the Bible on his own.

The Jews fall somewhere in between the Catholics and the Protestants when it comes to such competence. Among the Catholics, only the priests and some of the learned were expected to know Latin (and thus be able to read the Bible). Among the Protestants the Bible was made available in the vernacular. Among the Jews every male is supposed to learn some Hebrew and is to chant the Torah at his Bar Mitzva.

Do these considerations stemming from the second commandment add up to an anti-art emphasis, or perhaps a Christian denigration of visual delights? I don't think so. A comparison with role of sex in some Hindu worship may help us here: we as Christians affirm sex but don't bring it into the worship service. Likewise, Christians rightly affirm the value of the visual.

(2) In introducing the second point, which gets us into epistemology proper, I begin by reaffirming that the human sensory system is a good gift of God that should be received with gratitude and used as God intended. Hence I certainly would not wish to speak of Christian opposition to vision as such, or of Christian misgivings about the sensual delights which come to us via the eyes.

Having stated this qualification, I will go on to comment on a line of thought in epistemology that has been introduced by various thinkers but not carried as far as one might wish. A good place to begin is with John Dewey (1859-1952), who complained about the "spectator conception of knowledge." [NOTE 4] Dewey does not take a spectator approach to philosophy: he is a pragmatist who wishes to connect knowing and doing. (Think of the Christian theme of hearing and doing: does hearing have something to do with knowing?)

These thinkers maintain that in the history of most Western philosophy, vision tends to dominate perception as a whole (leading us to neglect the possibilities embedded in the other senses) and becomes the paradigm for knowledge. And so we speak of "Greek visualism." And it does not only pertain to Plato: in the opening chapter of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle declares that we love sight above all.

Other philosophers have also made the point that the most prevalent conception of knowing assimilates knowing to seeing. For example, Ortega y Gasset writes: "... from the days of the Greeks, almost all terms pertaining to knowledge and its factors and objects are taken from ordinary words pertaining to seeing and looking." [NOTE 5] Walter Ong observes: "The history of philosophy itself has largely been the history of a search after more and more adequate visualist and spatialist analogies by which to represent and deal with the real universe and the universe of the mind, but we are living in an age today which has begun to feel uneasy about this quest." [NOTE 6] In this regard, too, the history of philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato, as A.N. Whitehead once observed.

On this view about which Ong and other "feel uneasy," knowledge is seeing in a literal sense, or secondarily a metaphorical seeing or grasping of what is the case -- perhaps in "the mind's eye" (a notion that goes back to Plato). Our word theory is rooted in a Greek word for vision. An idea, etymologically speaking, is what someone *sees*.

Such hypostatization and reification lead thought in the direction of metaphysics. Hence Bruce Gregory opposes what he calls "the Archimedean perspective." He writes: "The idea of a place outside the universe on which to stand has become a fundamental myth of our culture. This myth has most often taken the form of a spectator view of knowledge -- the notion that we can stand aside from the action and comment on it from a detached viewpoint." [NOTE 7] He maintains that such talk relies on the metaphor of the "all-seeing eye" which is what one needs in order to have a "worldview."

The language of seeing is everywhere in philosophy, e.g. Wolterstorff's *Art in Action*, where we even *see* possibilities (p. 130-1). One "sees" that such-and-such is the case. A philosopher would not win much credibility if he maintained that he "hears" that such-and-such is the case. But what if he heard it from the Lord? Is revelation a matter of hearing? Or must we accommodate it to Greek visualism? Is revelation what man sees -- or what God says?

(Greek) visualism is bound up with distance and distantiation (for distance is simply built into visual knowledge). Here we have one of the roots of our contemporary Humanist notion of objectivity conceived of as distance. Ong appeals to Merleau-Ponty in his critique: "Now sight, [as MP has shown], is a fragmenting or dissecting sense. It thus serves as an analogue for our understanding because it cuts apart. It dismembers, and thus registers the dissolution inherent in all direct objects of our knowledge. More frankly, it kills. For man's knowing is even in a way murderous insofar as it is analogous to vision." [NOTE 8] (What does "ana-lysis" mean?) Likewise, Marshall McLuhan, who was one of Ong's students, speaks of the fragmenting power of the visual sense (see *Understanding Media*, p. 138) and tells us that the visual desacralizes. The eye is cool and detached.

Does the Bible have anything to say about these matters? Not in a direct epistemological way, but it is significant that the Bible speaks of knowledge in connection with relationships and love: "Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain" (Gen. 4:1). He wasn't just admiring her from afar. The Christian notion of the knowledge of God as dependent on the love of God is significant here. Moreover the knowledge which we have of God is bound up with his willingness to *disclose himself* to us. I maintain that voluntary self-disclosure is also a significant dimension of the deeper knowledge persons seek to have of one another.

This ideal of non-involvement also has a good deal to do with the difference between the Eastern mind (including the native peoples of North America) and the Western mind. Andrew Greeley: "Modern man may have a more highly developed consciousness of self than did the Indian who lived 'at one' with the primitive forest. He may know many things the Indian did not know, but the Indian was in touch with the world outside himself in a way that modern man cannot understand and indeed cannot even imagine. In this respect the Indian was superior to the modern, self-consciously alienated individualist." [NOTE 9]

Returning to the notion of objectivity, we should note that it does involve impartiality, which is indeed necessary in many of life's situations. But we have also seen that one of its components is distancing oneself, since distance is

necessary for seeing. These two taken together then translate into ideal of theoretical non-involvement which plays such an important role in academic culture. Do we teach it in our Christian colleges?

Another consideration to be mentioned at this point is that visualist terminology promotes the Humanist autonomy emphasis. Humanism is, among other things, the determination to "see for yourself" what is the case (as opposed to taking someone's word for it).

(3) The third point has to do with the debate in communication and education theory regarding *images* as means for communication as opposed to *words*. If words are more effective, we again have a prejudice against the visual, but only considered as a means of communication.

Neil Postman maintains that there is a "generation gap" between "the age-old tradition of a language-centered view of the world" and a "recently-emerged image-centered view." [NOTE 10]

Reginald Damerell, himself a specialist in media studies, also questions the usual assumption about the superiority of the visual over the linguistic: "... all of the visual media are inferior to print in conveying most types of useful information and knowledge. The only superiority of the visual media was in showing surfaces -- the looks of things." Damerell: "Among the many false notions perpetrated by educationists and broadcasted in schools by the teachers trained by them, is that the television generation learns more readily from pictures. To the contrary, raw visual data is the hardest kind of data from which to learn." [NOTE 11] Walter Ong concurs: "The picture must always be elucidated by the word more than the word by the picture." [NOTE 12]

Now let's make a general application to our understanding of revelation. Why doesn't God communicate to man via beautiful pictures? Note that even cartoons, which often make wonderful points, need captions. Specificity is needed in revelation: here we can learn something from the computer world. Divine revelation does not mean that God invites us to "see for ourselves." We read: "For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Prov. 2:6).

What is the general philosophical rationale for God's siding with the word over against the pictorial image -- at least as far as revelation is concerned? (This is admittedly a speculative question, but it does derive from reflection on the second commandment.) Is it not that God controls his communication with us by choosing the more explicit mode? That's why liberal theology with its

"picture Christ" (e.g. a clown) whom people must interpret for themselves is off the mark. The actual Jesus spoke extensively and drew in the Old Testament Scriptures repeatedly as he taught. These considerations should be borne in mind when we discuss the contrast and relationship between general and special revelation.

NOTES

[NOTE 1]

Rhetoric, Romance and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 331.

[NOTE 2]

E Voto Dordraceno (Kuyper's commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism), Vol. 3, p. 553.

[NOTE 3]

See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, Vol. 3, p. 576.

[NOTE 4]

The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action (New York: Perigree Books, 1980; first published in 1929), p. 23; see also Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 130-1, 164.

[NOTE 5]

Man and People, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: W. W. Norton, 1957), p. 68.

[NOTE 6]

The Barbarian Within and Other Fugitive Essays and Studies (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 84; see also *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 34. He adds an element to his lament when he returns to this matter in a later book called *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982): see p. 80.

[NOTE 7]

Inventing Reality: Physics as Language (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1990), p. 190.

[NOTE 8]

Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 138.

[NOTE 9]

Ecstasy: A Way of Knowing (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 64.

[NOTE 10]

Teaching as a Conserving Activity (New York: Delta, 1979), p. 76.

[NOTE 11]

Education's Smoking Gun: How Teachers Colleges Have Destroyed Education in America (New York: Freundlich Books, 1985), pp. 131, 136.

[NOTE 12]

The Presence of the Word, p. 322.