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# « Thou shall not take the Lord's name in vain » — being a sort of sermon on the hesitations of religious speech

Bruno Latour

*Res*

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## The difficulty of beginning

How should I begin? If I address this audience by saying « dear colleagues », since we are inside the walls of a University, you will expect me to give some sort of scientific talk, to provide you (through the use of description, slides, overheads) with access to some state of affairs which is not present right now in this room, but about which we would gain novel information thanks to a bewildering array of *transformations* offering here and now a grasp of things far away in time and space.<sup>1</sup> This is what I would have done, had I talked about the field work I am doing on a French Supreme Court, or had I chosen to describe to you the work my friend Shirley Strum is doing on baboons in Kenya, or if this other friend

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• A first draft of this paper was given at a special symposium on Objects organized at Brunel University by Dick Pels in September 1999. I tried to retain some of the oral tone indispensable for the argument. To make clearer the differences between regimes of enunciation, I included a revised section of a paper originally published in French, “Quand les anges deviennent de bien mauvais messagers.” *Terrain* 14 (1990) : 76-91, translated by Lydia Davis and unpublished in English.

<sup>1</sup> This is the definition of what I have called referential chain. See B. Latour *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the reality of science studies*. (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1999), chapter 2 for a more complete definition.

of mine, Steve Glickman, had decided to present you his novel data about complex hormonal pathways in hyenas. Neither the supreme court, nor the baboons, nor the hyenas would have been present here in themselves, but they would not have they been absent either, since through their being lifted and displaced into forms (the etymological meaning of in-formation) they would have been made to be transportable, describable, countable. Then, you could have qualified those informations as accurate or inaccurate, likely or unlikely, disputable or indisputable, interesting or uninteresting, true or false. This is what William James called his «deambulatory theory of truth», tracing through the successive modifications of forms a path in space-time with two provisional termini, one here among this distinguished audience, the other absent and far, while the connections between the two are laid with various types of what I called inscriptions, the « form », which have the peculiarity of maintaining some features stable while everything else, « the matter », change.<sup>2</sup> Had I decided to speak in that way, I would have extended a reference chain a bit further by making you familiar with those field sites far removed in space and time about which you would have learned something new.

On the other hand, the interpellation “dear colleagues” could have signaled the beginning of something less scientific : an adress not aimed at producing a reference pathway, but at mobilizing you as a group, or to help, in the very first words of the talk, in providing you with some sort of joint identity, of common will, some shared interest no matter how faint this common ground could be. Had I intended to do so, I would have continued by saying for instance : “Dear colleagues in science studies, after having scrutinized scientific practice for so many years, *we all need to work together* towards a more complete understanding of religious practice”. Then, you would have evaluated this statement, not by deciding whether it is accurate or inaccurate but by deciding for yourself if you wanted or not to be part of this “we” and share the common goal outlined for you by the speaker, or on the contrary, if you wished to extricate yourself out of this common will. Had I begun in that way, I would have started what could be called a *political* exhortation, having to do not so much with states of affair far away in time and space, not so much with the transportation without deformation of information, but with the *formation*, the shaping of a boundary between “us” and “they” through the performative use of “we”. This is what organizers, statewomen, activists often do when they begin by the vocative “dear comrades!”, “fellow citizens!”, or even the subdued “ladies and gentlemen”. Groups don’t exist by themselves and they need to be constantly whipped into existence, reminded of what they have in common, propped to action, stirred into taking their destiny into their hands, and mobilized toward some goal. Without information-carrying talks we would be stuck here and now without any way to move nor to refer, but without group-formation talks we would not know to what entity

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<sup>2</sup> W. James *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. (London, University of Nebraska Press, [1907] republished in 1996).

we belong nor with what sort of will we should be endowed.<sup>3</sup>

But now suppose that I start this talk by saying “Brothers and sisters!”. Since this is clearly an academic setting, something would be odd at once, as if I had changed the regime of enunciation and transformed this assembly who was expecting a scientific or, at any rate, a quasi-referential presentation, into a congregation. “Brothers and sisters” is the way priests, parsons, preachers and evangelists address their Sunday gatherings, and the word “sermon” would immediately have come to your mind. Those of you with bad memories of sermons would have jumped from their chairs in dismay (although it is hard to say whether in our life we have been more bored by religious hectoring than by academic lecturing...). But what exactly is the difference between the political talk I could have engaged in by saying “we in science studies” and this exhortation “brothers and sisters”? To be sure, the assemblage of a congregation is also the result of some sort of political talk in the same way as any scientific meeting, no matter how referential it purports to be, requires some sort of boundary-making, bond-enhancing. Behind every address about matters of fact, there is an associated group of colleagues and witnesses being produced —“we”, in science studies, have shown that. Still, “brothers and sisters” offers a key to my enunciation which engage you and me (you in decoding what I say, me in continuing what I have begun) on another path than that of political talk.

How are we going to define this regime of enunciation? If you did not switch off your brain as soon as the word ‘sermon’ was uttered, you would have probably felt that, if I had addressed you as “brothers and sisters”, I would have meant something else than trying to provide you with some piece of novel information about something far away in time and space, and also something else than offering you some type of identity, goal, interest, or common destiny. The first way to register this third type of enunciation is so far purely negative, but it is an important sort of negation: can I address you *without* giving you any information and *without* performing any group-bonding? Let me be even stronger: can I address you so as to take your attention *away* from the transportation of information and the making of identities? Is there room for that form of talk? Had I been courageous enough to face the ridicule of addressing you by *really* saying “Brothers and sisters”, I would have attempted a speech act that would have had the strange characteristic of attracting attention to you, here and now, as being what I call “persons”. I would have done something different from information-transfer or group-making, something that could be defined, very provisionally, as person-giving or presence-enhancing. It is to this form of highly specific speech act that generates or performs persons in presence and thereby a new assemblage of persons in

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<sup>3</sup> On the political regime of enunciation and the key notion of *autophuosis* see J. Dewey *The Public and Its Problems*. (Athens, Ohio University Press, [1927] republished in 1954), B. Manin *Principes du gouvernement représentatif*. (Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1995). B. Latour *Pandora's Hope* chapters 7 & 8.

presence, that I want to dedicate this sermon, I mean this lecture, and since I am not masochist enough to dare address an academic setting such as this one by a resounding “Brothers and Sisters”, I now start by a far less risky : “Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues”.

### **Redeeming the « power » of religion**

« Religion will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science ». <sup>4</sup> I want to begin with this quote by one of the unofficial Fathers of the Church, Alfred North Whitehead. “Regain its old power” should not mislead you about Whitehead’s intention nor about mine. The question before us today is not to go back to the past when the same more or less unified form of life, under the name of Christian religion, was assembling into a single civilisation, law, ethics, cosmology, piety, charity, science, letters, architecture and politics simultaneously. This sometimes beautiful, most of the time stifling, ‘total institution’, whose revamping has been dreamed many times by the various revivals of religion, especially in Catholicism and nowadays in Islam, is in no way *essential* to religion, but was, in the Christian tradition at least, a *contingent* factor due in large part to the demise of the Roman Empire. Religion has no vocation to be the *whole* of human experience and we have learned the hard way —and are still learning— the danger that religious hegemony represents for all the other forms of life. To distinguish the different regimes of enunciation instead of lumping them into one, is precisely what I want to do.

But to say that religion need never again replace all other functions as it once did for contingent reasons, does not mean that, in the non-modern world that I am interested in mapping out, religion should be understood as if it were a mere remnant of an unenlightened past, as the modernists should like to think —Science, with a capital S, illuminating out the dark recesses of religious imagination. « Disenchantment has also produced a radical disenchantment with the idea of disenchantment itself; or, in other words, demythification has finally turned against itself, recognising that even the idea of the elimination of a myth is a myth », writes Vattimo in a recent book on faith.<sup>5</sup>

It does not mean either that religion should remain in a state of utter weakness as a puny furniture of an individual soul. Certainly, the failure to ‘regain its old power’, does not imply that religion should be so debased as to become an odd form of psychology. Here is Whitehead again as cruel as he is accurate : « Each revival touches a lower peak than its predecessor, and each period of slackness a lower depth. (...) Religion is tending to degenerate into a decent formula wherewith to embellish a comfortable life » (p.223). To sum up, it is not because we want to make sure that religion does not overstretch itself that we wish to underestimate its quality.

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<sup>4</sup> A. N. Whitehead *Science and the Modern World*. (New York, Free Press, 1925 republished in [1967]) p.224

<sup>5</sup> G. Vattimo *Belief*. (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999) p.29

One of the way to avoid those two pitfalls is not to judge its ability to speak the truth according to the conditions of felicity of another form of speech act, and to recognize for each regime of enunciation its own dignity, its own type of vehicle, its own key.

So we need to be careful with this appeal for religion to “regain its old power”. The worst reactionary trends could be mixed with the novel (very old, always to be renewed) task of clarifying again what it means. I am not longing for the old power of what was in effect not religion but a mixture of everything from law and order to spirituality through rituals, arts and social work. But I don’t wish either that in the settlement that should respect the various forms of talks, religion be reduced to an impotent form of psychological consolation because of another contingent history, due this time to the emergence of the nation-states.<sup>6</sup> I recognize that it is difficult because century of bloody religious wars have made indispensable to cherish secularization as a way to avoid their return. In view of what happened in many nations today, no one in his right mind can wish to grant religion its former ‘power’. And yet, it might be desirable to reinterrogate secularization and to free religion from the status in which it has been forced to shrink in order to buy peace: a purely internal individual state of no ontological, cultural, metaphysical or public relevance.

As long as modernism seemed to be the obvious destiny of the planet, it was perfectly possible to stick to the older settlement and to consider secularization as the only way forward, a scientific world view replacing, every day more clearly, the religious attachments of the past. The public space of politics was allowed to accept, to be sure, many religious ideals, but on the condition that they relinquish any claims to represent another reality than that of private beliefs and inner states of worship. What filled public space was either the smallest common denominator of political interest and consensus, or a sort of watered down, averaged out definition of matters of fact as they are said to be offered by Science. The problem is that religion, politics and science suffer equally in this process of secularization since each has been torn and twisted beyond recognition. No matter how risky the task, we have to reopen this traditional western settlement that engaged not only religion, but also politics and above all science, into one inevitable destiny called modernization.

Secularization and modernization cannot pass for a definitive solution to the problem of what I call the « progressive composition of the common world ». They settle in effect on a very strange type of pluralism: there is *one* world, that of nature, that of what older philosophy called the “primary qualities”, the stuff out of which ultimate reality is made, and then there are *many* worlds, those of cultures, those of view points, those of beliefs and psychological states, those of religious dogmas. But those many worlds have only subjective relevance. They only reach the realm of “secondary

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<sup>6</sup> O. Christin *La paix de religion. L'autonomisation de la raison politique au 16<sup>e</sup> siècle*. (Paris, Le Seuil, 1997).

qualities” without ever having any say on what the world is really like. Their imagined worlds might appear meaningful since they correspond to psychological, emotive and personal attachments, but they are in fact meaningless since they have no ontological content. On the other hand, the one world, the world of primary qualities appears meaningless since it represents no value, meaning, interest, emotion, subjectivity whatsoever, but is the only meaningful and essential thing there is since it is the real stuff out of which we and the universe are made. This is what Whitehead has called « the bifurcation of nature ». <sup>7</sup> So whenever we reopen the question of secularization, we have to realize what price has been payed for the sort of pluralism it allowed. In effect, it is a pseudo pluralism for which no common ground will ever be offered : either there is one natural world but it offers no common value, or there are endless numbers of view points but they have no real ground ! The only traditional way out of this divided constitution is to obtain closure through a very limitative definition of politics that either bring scientific expertise back in (eliminating secondary qualities through the brutal import of primary qualities and forming thus the one world of nature known by Science), or to reach a compromise between equally ungrounded opinions (the struggle of interests). I contend that science, politics and religion are all unfairly treated in this definition of pluralism which has not explored either plurality nor closure seriously. <sup>8</sup>

You might wonder why should social scientists not be content to let religion be a ‘decent formula to embellish a comfortable life’? Because it would have lost its specific “power” (we still have to define what it is), a loss rendering us unable to reconnect with what religion was in the past, cut off from the springs that generated so many vivid forms of civilisation. More importantly, we would be disconnected from the many other cultures, persons and nations for which religion —in one of its many guises— is not only their present but also their future. How can an anthropologist, a sociologist, a scholar, enter respectfully in relation with the Others when he or she possesses a thoroughly secularised version of what religion is (or more exactly ‘was’, since in the eyes of a secular modernist a religious attitude is always something soon to disappear or something to be explained by appealing to something else which is its real and hidden cause — more of this below) ?

A large part of what we call ‘fundamentalism’ in many official religions today might largely due to a reaction (positive or negative) to the modernist gaze that takes it for granted that the question of religion is finished, that it can no longer exhibit novelty and change “in the same spirit as science”, and that it belongs to the realm of irrational behaviour and should be understood in terms of identity, psychology, politics, tradition or past influence, that is, everything but religion itself. In my work

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<sup>7</sup> A. N. Whitehead *Concept of Nature*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1920).

<sup>8</sup> On the politics of primary and secondary qualities, see B. Latour *Politiques de la nature. Comment faire entrer les sciences en démocratie*. (Paris, La Découverte, 1999).

on diplomacy, I am interested in equipping the diplomats —the new name given by Isabelle Stengers for one of the functions of scholar—<sup>9</sup> with a more charitable and respectful definition of religion than the one provided to them by secular and modernist interpretations so that negotiations to compose a common world might start with a better chance of success than the usual approach: « Let's leave religion aside, let's leave your convictions at the door of the common world ». No diplomacy would be possible if such preliminary abandonment remained the prerequisite diktat for peace talks to begin. Religion cannot be limited to an inner conviction, despite our European history that made this essential limit the condition upon which Western states built their civil (scientific) peace. History should be allowed to move on for religion as well as for politics and science.

What is the alternative to the secular gaze with its absolute certainty that religion is dead? One way is indicated by Whitehead's sentence and that is to grant again to religion its spirit of change: « Theology itself exhibits exactly the same character of gradual development [as science], arising from an aspect of conflict between its own proper ideas » (p.217). Which conflict? The one, very well known by theologians, catechists, saints, propagandists, between forms of expression which are the unproblematic common sense of a period, and the grain of truth which tries to germinate within this ordinary turf. This distinction however is a very tricky one. « This evolution of religion, Whitehead continues, is in the main a disengagement of its own proper ideas from the adventitious notions which have crept into it by reason of the expression of its own ideas in terms of the imaginative picture of the world entertained in previous ages » (p.224).

We have to be careful here with the words 'disengagement' and 'adventitious' which Whitehead uses unproblematically. These words could indicate the well known fight between the Letter and the Spirit, as if the lighter Spirit existed as a force counter to the ponderous weight of the Letter. This opposition, although traditional would nonetheless be completely incoherent within the specificity of religious speech acts as expressed for instance by John: « *In principio erat Verbum... Et Verbum caro factum est* (Jn 1-1-4) ». The mere opposition of Letter and Spirit leads to the misconception that, if given the choice, one could chose the spirit *against* the letter or even *without* any letter; that one could obtain the representation without any representation, could get the Verb without any Flesh. This is an essential issue in the crisis of the iconoclast periods.<sup>10</sup> It is as though a scientist imagined it possible to gain access to reality directly without any instrument or against the weight of any instrument. The fight, if portrayed in this way, would look like a Manichean dispute between the forces of Evil —the Letter— and the forces of Good —the Spirit.

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<sup>9</sup> I. Stengers *Cosmopolitiques - Tome 7: pour en finir avec la tolérance*. (Paris, La Découverte-Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> M.-J. Mondzain *Image, icône, économie. Les sources byzantines de l'imaginaire contemporain*. (Paris, Le Seuil, 1996).



I want to attempt a different understanding of the distinction between forms of expression and what they express (although, because one never innovates in religious matters, I should say that I want to make a traditional understanding visible again by shaking it a bit). My formulation will be the following: there is no other spirit than the letter *slightly askew*, or should I say, *bent backward*, or, as I have explained elsewhere about religious images, *slightly broken*,<sup>11</sup> or in a Derridian formula (should we count him, too, among the Fathers or among the Prophets ?) *erased*, or, to use another more material and thus better metaphor, put under stress, tried out, passed through the crucible —should I say, crucified ?<sup>12</sup>

I multiply the strange metaphors to avoid the too easy conflict between the Letter and the Spirit (which, in its Paulinian interpretation, is the one between the Old Law and the New Law), and to replace it by the Letter —there is only the Letter, for the same reason as there is only the Flesh and the Present— in two slightly different stages, or regimes, or states of agitation : the Letter dead or alive. The power of religion (this power I am trying to define in this lecture about a sermon I have no authority to give) could be elicited again if only we would mark anew the difference between a dead and a living Letter, between a representation and its *re*-representation. « The great point to be kept in mind, » says Whitehead, « is that normally an advance in science will show that statements of various religious beliefs require some sort of modification. It may be that they have to be expanded or explained, or indeed entirely restated. If the religion is a sound expression of truth, this modification will only exhibit more adequately the exact point which is of importance. » p.224

Against the iconoclasts in science, in religion and in politics, who all imagine that the crisis of representation will be solved if only we could do away with all representations, one iconophile should insist that we have nothing but representation to which should be added the formidable spiritual addition of *more* re-representation to understand again and anew what is, what was, presented the *first* time. Religion is not about transcendence, a Spirit from above, but all about immanence to which is added the renewal, the rendering present again of this immanence. (I am not inventing anything, this is called ‘incarnation’, in Christian dogma). But for this immanence to be visible again in spite of the spiritualism of official theology —which is nothing but a distorted kind of rationalism— we have to make much more vivid the contrast between chains of reference chains and what I will call procession of angels.

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<sup>11</sup> In a paper very close to this B. Latour « How to be Iconophilic in Art, Science and Religion? » in C. Jones and P. Galison (editors) *Picturing Science, Producing Art* (London, Routledge: 1998) 418-440.

<sup>12</sup> « The only great paradox and scandal of Christian revelation is the incarnation of God, the *kenosis* —that is, the *removal* of all the transcendent, incomprehensible, mysterious and even bizarre features that seem to move so many theorists of the leap of faith » G. Vattimo *Belief* p. 55.

## On a crucial difference between instruments and angels



FIGURE.1. Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533 (National Gallery).

They stand leaning against a pedestal table on which geographical instruments are laid out. In the center of the picture, obliquely, the viewer can make out a sort of cuttlebone of a brownish color. If he puts his eye to the left side of the picture, almost touching his cheek to the painted surface, he will perceive a skull. These geographers who are beginning to construct the new space of the new world have asked the artist to include in their portrait a reference to vanity, a *memento mori*. Since he agreed, in order to obey the laws of this venerable genre, to place a skull in the lower part of the picture, why deform it? Why not add it to the instruments for surveying, measuring, and projecting as had been done in the case of so many other still lifes and so many other *memento mori*?<sup>13</sup>

It appears that a secret uneasiness lingers in these inventors of maps and these surveyors. What will their world be made of if they actually succeed too well in tracing it exactly through projection? *Where* will they put the other world, the ultra-world, that of God and of their faith? A secret uneasiness also lingers in the painter, Holbein, first Catholic and then Protestant, one of the best artisans of this new perspective that gives the viewer the impression that she is looking through a window the same size as the picture frame, at a spectacle that is unfolding before her. If Holbein succeeds too well in producing this impression of a spectacle projected and represented exactly, how will he also paint the other world? How will he render what is not a spectacle that one is witnessing but the movement of faith which transforms and converts? Most importantly, how will he represent in the *same* relationship and in the *same* picture the exact

<sup>13</sup> For a recent description of the absurdly renovated painting see S. Foister and M. Wyld *Holbein's Ambassadors*. (London, National Gallery, 1997) and on the painting practice of Holbein D. Wilson *Hans Holbein. Portrait of an Unknown Man*. (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996). For a simpler and older account of the same material J.-L. Ferrier *Holbein, les Ambassadeurs - anatomie d'un chef d'oeuvre*. (Paris, Denoël, 1977).

projection of the new geographical world and that of the divine world? Such is the enigma of this picture: representation triumphs, with its ceremonies and its works, its servants and its masters, before the dazzled eyes of the viewer. “But where has re-presentation taken place, that is, the act of *bringing together, again*, the convert and the subject of his conversion?” is the troubling question asked by the commissioners of the painting, the painter, the faithful believer, and the viewer.<sup>14</sup>

In order to resolve this difficulty, Holbein superimposes in the same picture two antagonistic points of view. Of the servants and agents of the faith, there remains no more than a skull, but a deformed skull, which refuses to be integrated into the rest of the picture according to the same optical coherence as the paved floor, the tapestries, the bodies, the table, and the instruments of observation. Not only does this skull remind us of death, as with any symbol of vanity, but it is painted on a slant, projected from another plane, as though to remind us that there exists another angle of view, another plane. “You are alive, you will be dead,” said the old *memento mori*. “You admire the beauty of your body, of the world, and of its forms, you will be disfigured and deformed like this skull,” murmurs the new.

Let us lean over the edge of the picture again, let us put our cheek against the varnish (in imagination only, for otherwise the guard would become red with anger and the alarms would go off). The cuttlebone becomes a skull. But what happens, now, to the proud ambassadors? They turn into deformed, monstrous bodies. If you look straight at the geographers, the world of faith becomes misshapen, obscene; if you take care to look straight at the world of faith, of which this skull is the residue, the artisans of the form of the world, the geographers, become in turn disfigured, grotesque.

One cannot hold at the same time, and in the same relation, representation and re-presentation; one cannot be at the same time, and in the same relation, viewer and convert. Between new science and old religion, there is now an incompatibility of points of view. What is concealed from the eyes of one is revealed to the eyes of the other. What is presented by one is distanced by the other. What is formed and figured by one is deformed and disfigured by the other.

However, in this picture, that alternation is no more than an uneasiness and a reminder — a *memento*, in fact. The entire space is occupied by the embassy and geography, perspective and instruments. Representation has triumphed. There is scarcely more than this scrap of fog, this brown scarf to make us uneasy, to remind us that vision can be muddied, that embassies can fail, that geography can be insufficient to describe the world, that there is, that there has been, that there may still be, other angles of vision. This deformed skull resembles most of all a

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<sup>14</sup> For a completely different interpretation having to do with East West commerce routes and luxury goods, see L. Jardine and J. Brotton *Global Interests* (London, Reaktion Books, 2000).

compunction, an obsession, a nostalgia. The ambassadors and geographers do not in the least want to abandon their new world. They want only to remember the possibility of the old one. Of the venerable religious pictures there remain only the *minimum*, projected askew. By introducing this skull, the ambassadors, so satisfied with themselves and their painter, literally look themselves in the navel, in a very narcissic way. Let us now go back up the river of time, let us follow in thought the umbilical cord that Holbein wanted to recall by means of his anamorphosis. Let us go back, for a while, to the old matrix that will allow us to understand, by way of contrast, the tribulations of scientific imagery by comparing them to those, neither more nor less painful, of pious imagery.

The two ambassadors or the two geographers are resting their elbows on the table on which lie instruments of cartography, cosmography, topography, in short, the *graphy* of the earth. Their mute faces, their heavy clothes, the flagged floor, the table, the beautiful green curtain that serves them as background — all this is meticulously *rendered* in a perspective so pure that the numerous commentators of this picture feel it to be somewhat maniacal. This picture offers to our eyes the exactly depicted image of representatives who in fact have the slightly rigid look of those who are, as they say, « *en représentation* », “showing off.” Even though Jean de Dinteville, Lord of Polisy, and Georges de Selve, Bishop of Lavour, may be there in flesh and blood and even though the former commissioned the picture, they seem so obviously representative of some abstract function that the title of the picture almost never mentions their names. Holbein has rendered exactly the type of the Ambassador, that is, the loyal and cunning mediator, rather content with himself, from whom one demands an exact accounting of his mission. But these perfect intermediaries<sup>15</sup> are presented in a geometrically constructed space, accompanied by the instruments of geometric construction or geographical surveying of the world.

The way in which the space of the perspective is rendered, the instruments that are positioned between the two men, all this suggests a meditation on the nature of the new mediators, the new spokesmen. The old Mediator is also present, but at the top of the picture, to the left, in the form of a minuscule crucifix hanging crooked on the wall, crowded by the edge of the frame and half hidden by the green cloth that serves as background to the scene. Instead of the veil of the Temple being torn in two before the man dying on the cross, the stage cloth half covers the horror that one no longer wants to see or can see. The cross no longer occupies the center of the picture, surrounded by figures ravaged by grief. As though in anticipated homage to Max Weber, two figures full of themselves frame a chorale by Luther and Merchants Arithmetic by Petrus Apianus ! They say the Bishop of Lavour was something of a reformer. I'm prepared to believe it. What bishop would agree to be painted standing in

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Intermediaries’ in my technical jargon are the opposite of ‘mediators’ : the first carry meaning without distortions, the second modify both the inputs and the outputs, they are in other words ‘events’.

front of a book on the calculation of interests while his Lord hangs rejected under a veil at the outer edge of the picture?<sup>16</sup>

The old sacred painting, the old re-presentation, the old mediation, becomes incomprehensible to the new ambassadors — and becomes comprehensible again, perhaps, in the eyes of the lover of science. Instead of contemplating some celestial apparition, piously kneeling on the side, the men occupy the place of the holy figures they stand before us and look us straight in the eyes as the old Pantocrator. They offer to our gaze the instruments that at last allow one to offer the world to our gaze. The centers of calculation have in fact become all-powerful. Are we contemplating a symbol of vanity or what should be called an “atonement” or even an “Extreme Atonement”? The answer depends on the green curtain; if you part it, the two geographers find themselves, according to Baltrusaitis, in the very middle of Westminster Cathedral.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, if you keep the veil of the sanctuary closed, they find themselves in a warm and well protected spot in the Château de Polisy.

Depending on whether or not you correct the anamorphosis, whether or not you part the veil, you experience either the extreme fragility of the world of representation or the anemic character of the world of representation. In the latter case, Christ mediator has no more blood to spill; no one possesses enough strength, now, to set down his Holy Face on painted canvas. Pictures are no longer epiphanies, no longer incarnate the Presence in oil, varnish, egg, and pigments. Nor do they really present the mediators of God; they represent the world, men, merchants, and the sciences. They have become instruments, recording devices. Perspective has invented the change of location, without deformation, of an image in space.<sup>18</sup> Starting from a drawn figure, and without additional information, the viewer can reconstruct, with rule and compass, how that figure would appear from all the other angles of vision. This geometrical construction thus accelerates the production of those immutable motives, those constants, that define the work of the scientists, hard or supple, warm or cold. If we compare processions and chains of reference, we thus have to recognize two opposite ways to deal with context. The first does not hesitate to modify the message in order to repeat the same thing — no

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<sup>16</sup> In a present exhibit in Bern, called *Bildersturm*, the curators have dared reconstituting in a sort of Madame Tussaud way, the Protestant iconoclasts at work melting the precious vases of the catholic rituals to mint them into coins! All of this without the slightest distance: only as a celebration of the iconoclastic gesture... which proves that everything in the Ambassador's painting is still active today — at least in Bern. All idol-smashers are not in Afghanistans, they can be celebrated in comfortable Switzerland as well.

<sup>17</sup> J. Baltrusaitis *Anamorphoses*. (Paris, Flammarion, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> W. M. Ivins *Prints and Visual Communications*. (Cambridge Mass, Harvard U. P., 1953), M. Kemp. “Geometrical Description from Brunelleschi to Desargues: A Pictorial Means or and Intellectual End?” *Proceedings Of The British Academy* 70, (1984): 89-132. Louis Marin has often made the point that optical coherence allowed for even more distorsion to become foregrounded anew, see his beautiful L. Marin *Opacité de la peinture. Essais sur la représentation*. (Paris, Usher, 1989).

transport without retranslation ; the second manages to maintain the constant message through the process of transformations — a matter of constructing immutable mobiles. The first does not capitalize ; the second capitalizes indefinitely toward the center.

In Holbein's picture, the two meanings of the word "presence" already differ so much that we can easily characterize the two different systems of translation. One is no longer going to modify the message completely as a function of the context, in such a way as to feel the same presence in each place ; one is going to try to transport information from one context to the other, through a process of transformations, in order to be able to act, in one place, from a distance, on another place which becomes, thereby, known and dominated. In both systems there is translation, transformation, and the maintenance of a constant, but the meaning of these three words is totally different. In the first system, one must invent in order to remain faithful to what remains always present. In the second, one must be able to align inscriptions in such a way that they remain always superimposable and allow access to what is distant. The first permits no capitalization since from one context to the other no information is acquired. The second creates centers of calculation through the accumulation of information which removes all the other places to the periphery. The first system maintains, through the processions of mediations, a *revelation*, whereas the second permits *discoveries*. The first system forms what I shall call *processions*, whereas the second creates chains of reference.

An example taken from the midst of the "Quarrel over ritual" (*Querelle des rites*) will perhaps explain the two opposed sources of betrayal and faithfulness which lived on side by side for so long. Jesuits who had settled in China in the XVIIth century, write to Rome complaining about the fact that, under pressure from the Dominican friars, they are obliged to utter the formula of the consecration in Latin. In effect, when the priest says: "*Hoc est enim corpus meus*," it presents to the ear of a Chinese : "Hocu ye-sutu ye-nim co-lo-pu-su-me-um," which, if the Jesuits did not provide a French translation of what the unfortunate Chinese hear at the moment of the transsubstantiation, could pass for a fairly good approximation, give or take a few consonants, of: "emanation, ancient, lord, office, rule, handsome, rest, each, road, flee, thing, meditate, greening, meadows".<sup>19</sup>

Which is the greater sacrilege ? the Jesuits then ask. To present to the Chinese ear a hodgepodge that one cannot make head or tail of, or to translate the Latin into Chinese, at the risk of using words that possess, in the current or literary language, a meaning perhaps shocking to Rome. Two definitions of faithfulness and of translation are opposed throughout the quarrel over ritual. Either the Jesuits say the message again making themselves Chinese with the Chinese, in which case the content of the message, compared word by word with that of the Romans, becomes

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<sup>19</sup> Etiemble *Les jésuites en Chine, la Querelle des Rites (1552-1773)*. (Paris, Julliard Collection Archives, 1966).

incomprehensible ; or the Jesuits imitate the Dominican friars and repeat word by word the Roman message, in which case the movement of the message into another language, into another civilization, is suspended. The Dominican friars, like the Jesuits, can both be branded anathema or heretics ; the former because they bravely martyr themselves and see this martyrdom as additional proof of their faithfulness to Rome and the immunity which the Jesuits enjoy as a proof of their lack of ardor ; the latter, because those ignorant and filthy monks, by refusing to adapt their message, lose for Christ all of Asia, and if they are indeed faithful are so only to Rome. We know what happened. The Jesuits were forced to abandon their “dangerous accommodations,” and the Church of Rome did in fact lose half the earth, preciously keeping a repository which has since shrunk so much because it is taken to be a treasure to be transmitted without deformation, that is to say, paradoxically, that it should be transported like a scientific reference.

I chose the quarrel over ritual because it was at that moment that the machine for repeating jammed, just as I chose Holbein’s picture because in it, the sacred painting of a century earlier was already no more than a compunction.

However, this machine did not always stall. When it functioned in full operation, a succession of speeches whose literal form was different offered so many proofs of faithfulness, correct repetitions. If Saint Paul, if Jesus of Nazareth, if the Church Fathers, if the unfortunate bishops lost among the Visigoths, had settled their quarrels over ritual in the manner in which Rome settled that of the 17th century, we would never have heard of Christianity. It would have remained one of the innumerable millenarian Aramaean sects known only to historians.

The amplitude of the repetition, the amplitude of the translation, the amplitude of the betrayal, is precisely what characterizes, therefore, faithfulness to the message on the part of all these inventors, innovators, traitors, and translators. Let us think of the amazing faithful betrayal through which Jesus, announcer of God’s kingdom, turned into the one who is announced, the Christ.<sup>20</sup> Since it is now that he has been resurrected, the disciples say to each other, it is now, in their language, that the Gentiles, the Greeks, the Romans, the Visigoths, must understand him for themselves. And let us begin first by translating into Greek, into Latin, the words “Jesus,” and the words “resurrection,” let us transform the texts through and through, let us interpolate, let us add, let us cut and patch, let us adapt, let us invent. Saint Paul says nothing else throughout the epistles ; if it is necessary to be unfaithful to the Law and to circumcision, well, let us be. “Do not seek him among the dead, but among the living.” Either the preaching refers to Jerusalem, to the customs and languages of an Aramaean sect of the circumcised, in which case the uncircumcised do not

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<sup>20</sup> On those classical themes of exegesis, see the excellent review of recent scholarship done by D. Marguerat, E. Norelli, et al., Eds. (). *Jésus de Nazareth. Nouvelles approches d'une énigme*. (Paris, Labor et Fides, 1998).

understand the message, and thus the message, which is all to do with presence, is not faithfully transmitted ; or it is faithfully transmitted, and immediately, speaking in their languages as on the day of the Pentecost, each begins saying *something else*.

In this system of translation, through a paradox which we no longer understand, one must never cease to speak in a different way in order to be able to repeat the same thing. No *transport* from one point to another without *transformation*. The people who inhabited the Mediterranean basin and Europe for fifteen centuries were too different for the letter of the message to remain recognizable. Even within a given culture, the letter must constantly change, since the message is understood only if it appears new, present again for the first time. Here too, no transports of enthusiasm without a profound transformation of lives, of rituals, of sentences, of works, of mores, of practices, of pieties. In this system of translation, one can remain faithful either through daring invention or through repetitive transmission and one can betray through tedious repetition as well as through careless innovation.

Processions, too, transport messages, images, rituals, laws, books, works, tales, but this transportation is done at a cost of some transformation, this balance between what is kept and what is modified being called a *tradition*. What is maintained by this chain of tradition is the certainty that, whatever may be the number of intermediaries, they all faithfully repeat something similar even if they transform it, *because* they transform it. The intensity of the revelation is proportional to the layering, the multiplication, the piling, the redoubling of mediators. An ample community is formed among all those faithful transformers, each one of whom realizes, for himself, what the others are saying and what he had not understood until then. The communion of saints emerges from this fraternity : they have had the same experience, they too have understood this. What is “this” ? What their predecessors had understood and what is still present today *in* the same forms, *in* other forms.

The logic of the processions does not progress, except in intensity ; it is afraid of innovation even though it continually keeps on inventing ; it endeavors not to repeat tediousness, even though it continually keeps on repeating the same rituals. The tradition is enriched without wanting to win out. It layers intermediaries, it does not capitalize them. It likes above all to establish correspondances, saturate with transversal liaisons the different messages amassed in the course of time. It likes to purify the message continually, but each purification becomes a new treasure that is added to the sacred repository and enriches it, complicates it, further. It likes to make the message more precise, but this sets in motion, each time, councils, sessions of tribunals, congregations, that accumulate still more points of doctrine, theology, and canonical law, and complicate even further the movement of the message.

Immense, venerable, complex, infallible, betraying and translating, saturated with mediations, such is this community that maintains the



tradition intact by enriching it, by inventing it out of whole cloth, this Roman Church from which Henry VIII broke away, these long chains of re-presentation among which Holbein chose not to place himself and which he no longer depicts except obliquely, like a compunction, viewed from the logic of networks. That which layers and forms processions, I will call *angel* in contrast to that which aligns and maintains networks, which I call *instrument*.

The ambassadors-geographers are not angels. In saying that, I am not challenging their morality but their aptitude in creating successions of repetition. Inversely, the angels, contrary to common belief and etymology, are bad messengers and execrable geographers. Their intellectual capacities and their spirit of rigor are not in question, either, but simply their inability to show as good references as those of the instruments.

The angels do not transport an undeformable message through space-time, they call out to people and keep saying : “Watch out! Take care! He’s not here! That isn’t the question ! You’re the one this is about ! Someone is going to talk to you ! Don’t hang up !...” Angels are not messengers, but meta-messengers — and that is precisely why they are represented as beings superior to mail deliverers, telephone operators, and all the modems and faxes of this world here below. In painting as in tales, they have a phatic function, they say : “Hello !” Who is speaking, what are they saying, what is the object of the decision, what is the content of the message ? — this the Angel never says, never transports in the form of , an express letter, a packet of bytes. It is up to the interlocutor to decipher it.

It is only if the viewer has understood for him- or herself what it is about that one can say the message was faithfully “transmitted.” In other words, the exact content of the message is in the hands of the interlocutor, the receiver, and not in those of the messenger. The messenger carries a container, an interpellation, a metalanguage, a way of establishing every possible mediation. If one unfolds the phylactery unrolled by the angels one will find another *messenger* for instance “Rejoice, for a Savior is born unto you” ; and if one unfolds the name of Savior, one will find a messenger once again : “It is He the Son of God.” In other words, there is never any message ; there are only messengers ; and this is the angelical and evangelical message.

The angel painted on the holy picture — or the picture that one can consider in its entirety as an angel — addresses the receiver. If the latter occupies the place planned for him by the sender and by the messenger, he understands what they both want to say. To understand is to send *another* messenger, different in his content from the first, but one who allows a third receiver to realize for himself what the second and the first had also understood. From the third to the first one cannot say one has *gained* much since each picture, each tale, each figure differs from the preceding.

Of course, from the point of view of an outside observer, one has gained in richness since new works, new dogmas, new acts of faith have been produced, but there exists no point, along this chain, where one could

capitalize all the intermediaries and accumulate what the others have said, done, or been. In fact there is no outside observer, there is not yet any outside observer, capable of capitalizing. The first did not send any message-content to the third. The third did not obtain any information about the first. On the other hand, the third has the impression of understanding exactly what happened to the first, what burst in on the second, what descended suddenly in a great rustling of feathers and wings. The same thing is happening to him or her now.

What is peculiar about religious truth is that it can never appear as a new idea, since it does not inform, and yet is mendacious if one does not have the impression one is hearing it for the first time. To understand the good news that the messenger is bearing is to perceive at last that this news is a renewal of all the messengers borne since the dawn of times. All the envoys are returning ; the delegates are swooping down on the interlocutor like a flight of thrushes ; everything is a great beating of wings. If other enunciations, such as those of fiction, for instance, consist in sending messages and messengers elsewhere, into another space-time, in order to take leave of the *ego, hic et nunc*, one can say that the angels, on the contrary, bring the interlocutor back to the *ego, hic et nunc*.<sup>21</sup> When they appear, people are presented to one another. All disengagements are annulled ; all delegates merge. The multiplicity of witnesses now say only one thing, form one single body. Those venerable expressions are not so imprecise, that say that the Heavens gape, that one sees processions of angels, that one hears a divine music, that the light becomes blinding. To paint these illuminations is truly the faithful way of repeating the messenger : time is vanquished ; space is vanquished. "Death, where is thy victory?"

But if the meaning of the word representation is allowed to mutate, if the angels are no longer asked to present the good news once again to an interlocutor who will once again give content to the message, they are asked to move through space-time a content which would be its exact representative whatever might be, in other respects, the moral or mental state of the receiver and whatever might be the successive materials assuring its transport. Angels are no longer asked to transport with enthusiasm a messenger and one of the faithful, but to transport faithfully a message. They no longer convoke the faithful ; they are convoked so that they may all align themselves and form, through the superimposition of their messages, a single continuous conduit that would give one access to Jerusalem "as though one were there."

Alas, convoked and aligned in this way, not a single one of the old mediators superimposes his message on the preceding one. The good angels become bad angels. How wrenching it is to see that the wonderful pictures are dreadful informants ; that the successive apparitions of the truth are embroideries ; that the tales that had transported us with enthusiasm during fifteen centuries give no detailed information about

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<sup>21</sup> For a definition of enunciation structure, see A. J. Greimas and J. Courtès, Eds. (). *Semiotics and Language an Analytical Dictionary*. (Bloomington, Indiana U.P., 1982).

anything and that the more precise, psychological, historical, and detailed they are, the more belated, apocryphal, or reshaped they are !

Used as instruments of knowledge, the angels immediately lose their colors and their feathers. They fall. Called upon to say once and for all what the message is that they bear, they are obliged to confess, embarrassed and sheepish, that they have no message, that they have lost it along the way, or that in fifteen centuries they have, believing they were doing a good thing, substituted many other messages for the original message. Once their phylacteries have been deciphered, they hang miserably and are not worth even the price of a fresh recording tape.

This fall of the angels seems all the more dramatic because the two opposing systems of translation are both just as complete, they both excite the best minds of the time, and each defines truth, exactitude, faithfulness, and mendacity, but in different ways. In the translation of the angels, the *signified* —a past participle— can change form and this won't matter, provided the *signifying* —a present participle— remains intact. Past participles as different as “Yahveh is coming,” “the Kingdom of God is near,” “Jesus was the Messiah,” “Son of God,” “Mary mediator,” can all express equally faithfully what is *presently participating* into the elocution. Angels all become equally mendacious as soon as the unfaithful reverses the movement and takes the superimposition of signifieds for faithfulness, independently of its participation in the signifying. Yet it is precisely this translation that assures, in the other system, faithfulness ! Only if it is possible to maintain intact a *signified*, a content, whatever may be otherwise its successive signifiers, will one be able to represent exactly in one point of space-time all the other points.

Logic of PROCESSIONS	Logic of NETWORK
same container through different contents	same content through different containers
faithfulness = play of repetition which keeps the same message always new	faithfulness = superimposition of the inscribed contents
unfaithfulness = either dangerous innovation or tedious repetition	unfaithfulness = loss of alignment through containers
the message is a messenger	the message is a piece of information
the meaning depends on the receiver	the meaning does not depend on moral state of the receiver
gain = different repetition of the same messenger	gain = new information
multiplicity of mediators	capitalization of mediations
if transfer successful : all mediators are present	if transfer successful: annulment of mediators
return to the <u>hic et nunc</u> presentation	extension in space-time access to the distant
re-presentation	re-presentation
faithful believer is struck	scientist is dominant
knowledge without possessions	cumulative knowledge

compatibility with the past	progress through elimination
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## Two opposite misinterpretations

If we now have a better grasp on this contrast between those two different vehicles, it might be easier to lift some of the obstacles to the re-representation of religion today —and by today, I really mean today, *hic et nunc* for you as listeners composing now, because of my unusual manner of speaking, a gathering of persons, those who receive the present of presence (who, at least, would have got it if I had given a sermon and not a lecture about the difficulty, nowadays, of giving sermons)? Alas, the obstacles are formidable —have been made formidable— because of two complementary and opposite moves, one among the religious propagandists and the other in the camp of their enemies. I would call the first the ‘arrears in translation work’ and the second the ‘curse of antifetishism’.

### Arrears in translation

Let’s begin with the first. This growing gap in translation work (and it grows every day) is due to the abandonment by religious minds of this ‘spirit of change’ advocated by Whitehead. As he said so forcefully, this laziness, this defensive attitude, although it looks like a courageous championing of religion against the decadent spirit of the age —we hear a lot of this coming nowadays from the City of Vatican— shows in effect, he says provocatively, a *lack of faith* : « They [theologians] pictured themselves as the garrison of a fort surrounded by hostile forces. (...) This particular picture fostered a pugnacious spirit which really expresses an ultimate lack of faith », and he goes on, in a less convincing way : « They dared not to modify because they shirked back the task of disengaging the spiritual message from the associations of a particular imagery » (p.225). We find again the unfortunate word ‘disengaging’ and the danger here in which Whitehead might fall of using the Platonic trope of a spirit versus letter (‘spiritual message’ versus ‘particular imagery’) as if religion had anything to do with spirituality, as if the message it conveys could be anything else but ‘the imagery’ under a certain strain that we have to define —no ! that we have to perform on the spot, today, at this hour. Without imagery and without particular imagery there is no spirit whatsoever.<sup>22</sup>

But in spite of the iconoclastic slippage, the argument is clear: if you fail to modify the imagery you also fail to convey the message and you increase the gap in translation, forcing the listeners to confuse the dated imagery for what there is to understand : you replace a genuine mystery by puzzling artifactual enigma. There is no other sin than this one: having confused the message with an artifact, having confused the distinction

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<sup>22</sup> This is the beautiful expression taken from the Byzantine quarels by M.-J. Mondzain *Image, icône, économie* « La vérité est image, mais il n’y a pas d’image de la vérité ».

between the scandal of faith with the completely artificial scandal of trying to sell counterfeit puzzles for deep mysteries. Vattimo has turned this into a new right : « All of us should claim the right not to be turned away from the truth of the Gospel in the name of a sacrifice of reason demanded only by a naturalistic, human, all too human, ultimately unchristian, conception of God's transcendence » (p.55).

We can now elaborate the first sentence of Whitehead : if scientists spend nights and days trying to make absolutely sure that the new phenomena they elicit are not artifacts but incontrovertible facts, how much more scruple, how many more nights and many more days should not be spent by theologians and the common folks to make sure that they are not confusing *what* there is to say —the stress, the strain in the expression which by definition has to be renewed for each utterance— and accepted modes of expression —which pass, like cultures, fashions and time. The Christian tradition has been built upon that scruple, and so have all the successive renewals and the great Reformation itself, but it is fair to say that, in the last three hundreds years —the age of science precisely— this spirit of change, this ability to accept novelty, this daringness in invention, the discrimination between spirit and letter has been stalled

There exists a good proof of that interruption in translation which is as simple as it is devastating. That religious power is not understood is clear in that it provokes any good solid contemporary mind to recoil in discomfort —a reaction I am sure, generated in this assembly by my talking about it in a serious manner— or, even worse, it triggers a yawn of polite indifference. What is the power of a form of speech that has lost all power —a salt which has lost its bitterness? What is the meaning of a new truth that is heard by its listeners as the rehashing of one more old lie ? The drama here is that, by a typical reversal of the attribution of responsibility, reactionary Christians take as proof of the tediousness and decadence of this age what is in fact the result of their own laziness in pursuing the translation task of their fathers. Instead of woefully confessing that they have failed because they have not been understood, they believe themselves in the right to keep to their old ways precisely because of the outrage they generate by sticking to miserable formulas against common sense. The dream of catholicity has shrunk in a nightmare of the peculiar. In a complete reversal of the story of the Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit made every nation understand the same message in one's own language, Christians managed to make every nation *misunderstand* the same message clothed in a language which is utterly foreign *to all* ! It takes a Devil to manage this heresy of all heresies : the constant shrinking of the meaning of religious meaning (infinitely worse than the heresies reproached to the contemporary world who was left with nothing else to do but select out of these huge dead bodies beached on their shores bits and morsels of rituals, imageries and dogmas for their multifarious sectarian interests).

The measure of this heresy becomes apparent in this remarkable sentence of Whitehead : « The presentation of God under this aspect of

power awakens every modern instinct of critical reaction. This is fatal ; for religion collapses unless its main positions command immediacy of assent. In this respect the old phraseology is at variance with the psychology of modern civilisations » p.227. Against all the reflexes of reactionary Christians, we have to say that ‘the psychology of modern civilisation’ is *right*, and if this contemporary spirit is shocked by the demands of odd claims it is not a good scandal, but a bad one, because the psychology of secular Europe is the ordinary common sense which should be used to signify what it means to be religious today, and which has been lost by trying to replace it by the representations of 4.000 BC desert nomads, of 12<sup>th</sup> century servants, Renaissance literati, or 19<sup>th</sup> century exquisitely polite Victorian dons. ‘Immediacy of assent’ is the key to the power of religion.

Whitehead's conclusion is inescapable : if an all powerful God is no longer understandable, it should be replaced by a *powerless* God ;<sup>23</sup> indeed, if God itself is an obvious obstacle to religious understanding, God should be declared dead (again, no innovation here, that the son of God has died is part of the canon). Exactly in the same way that Paul declared circumcision to be no longer the sign of a pious soul, belief in God should be discarded, as have Ptolemeus’s epicycles or the ether of the 19<sup>th</sup> century physicists. This does not mean a wholesale abandonment of the religious message, a surrender to a wordly spirit, since the message of religion was *never more at ease* in the ordinary belief in God of the former centuries than it is in the secular atheism of the present age. Existing more easily in one given form of expression is *not* the character of this sort of message which represents itself in the cracks, discrepancies, uncertainties, dissimilitudes, breaking up of any form of common parlance. If God had been so good as an expression of the faith, then why retell it through the verb of Christ ? and if Christ had been so definitive an expression, then why should the Holy Spirit be invoked to renew the meaning ? and if the Holy Spirit was so accurate a statement, then it would be in vain that the Church has been deploying its hesitations over the erratic course of history.

Theologians should not shun but on the contrary embrace the formidable chance provided by a thoroughly secularised spirit to say that there is no powerful, omniscient, omnipresent Creator God, no providence, that God does not exist (or maybe does not exist yet, as Whitehead could argue), and to see in those common-sense obvious features of ordinary talk the expression, the power of religion which may start exactly as freshly as it once did, when it had to use the obvious common parlance of ancient people for whom God was as unproblematic as market forces are for us today. Expanding on Whitehead again, I could say that as long as people don’t understand religion in the same way as they understand shopping (to take within Americanised cultures another

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<sup>23</sup> “All actual entities share with God this characteristic of self-causation. For this reason every actual entity also shares with God the characteristic of transcending all other actual entities, including God” A. N. Whitehead *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology*. (New York, Free Press, [1929] republished in 1978), (p.223).

‘total institution’ which, in its complete and undisputed grasp might arguably be reminiscent of what religion might have been in the Middle Ages), the gap in translation, the debt in translation will not have been repaid. Let me say this even more provocatively : in the good old days, supposedly ‘Ages of Faith’, people went to Church with the same alacrity, ordinariness, and lack of surprise as we now go shopping on Sunday. No use in opposing faith and shopping, like spirituality and materiality because in both cases there was something that rendered Faith alive and not dead and it is this *same* thing that should now turn —if only you did not ‘lack faith’ !- the ordinary way of life (shopping) into the power of religion. In an extraordinary metaphor, really worthy of the Fathers, Whitehead, in another book, writes : « A system of dogma may be the ark within which the Church floats safely down the flood-tide of history. But the Church will perish unless it opens its windows and let’s the dove to search for an olive branch» (p.145-146).<sup>24</sup>

### **The weaknesses of antifetichism**

But the diplomatic work would be impossible, and the dove would never find any land, if we were only castigating the religiously minded for their mounting deficit of translation —immensely larger and deeper than that of the US commercial deficit and caused by a much less healthy economy of signs... For the dove to bring back an olive tree, the olive tree must be planted. Unfortunately, if we now turn to the enemy camp, the chances are no better for the resumption of talks. It just happens that religion has been used, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to sharpen the teeth of social scientists in forming the ideal of what a good explanation of a clearly irrational phenomenon should be. As a way of making sense of religion, against which, for a number of good political reasons, they had to fight —a religion itself so slow in sorting out the many various features which had been mixed by mistake in its premature dream of totality— they invented the notion of *belief*.

This is where fetishes enter the European scene (as William Pietz has so beautifully documented) as an accusation levelled against believers by non-believers, although I should really say : levelled against non-believers (since no one, according to me, has ever believed in any fetish) by believers, that is, by those rationalist scholars who believe in beliefs as an explanation of otherwise absurd behaviour (as they describe ‘worshipping an idol’).<sup>25</sup> Belief in belief has the unfortunate consequence of depriving the one accused of holding belief of any connection with the *what* that is the object of the belief. For instance, it became obvious for most sociologists of religion, that God cannot have any role in the behaviour of any believer

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<sup>24</sup> A. N. Whitehead *Religion in the Making*. (New York, Fordham University Press, 1926).

<sup>25</sup> W. Pietz. “The Problem of the Fetish, I.” *Res* 9, (1985): 5-17.

“The Problem of the Fetish, II: the Origin of the Fetish.” *Res*, 13 (1987): 23-45. “The Problem of the Fetish, III: Bosman's Guinea and the Enlightenment Theory of Fetishism.” *Res*, 16 (1988): 105-123.

who says things like ‘God makes me do this’, ‘God revealed this to me’, or ‘inspired me’ or ‘saved me’. *Confessions* like those of Augustin are for them, in all their explicit statements, a tissue of lies, or more politely, an expression or symptoms of other deeper and darker forces, which it is the task of the analyst to unravel.

We are so accustomed to this professional reflex that when we have to study a pilgrimage where the Virgin Mary appears at noon every Sunday, no one in his or her right scholarly mind would take the Virgin *herself* as the reason why so many people gather there every Sunday for decades, in spite of the fact that this is what is *explicitly* said by thousands of the faithful. If they confess « the Virgin has changed my life », they are deluded and should be either redressed —in the militant manner of past centuries— or studied with interest —according to the hypocritical respect of so many social scientists— as one more glaring case of manipulation by forces unbeknownst to the actors.

Nowhere more than in religious studies did scholars in the social sciences learn : a) to deprive of any proper ontological status the entities invoked by those they study; b) to ignore the explicit wordings and behaviour of those they study ; c) to substitute what is said to be felt by what is *not* said and *not* felt, the ‘unknown’ which only they, the social scientists, see and feel (or, as they say, ‘know’). Once one gets used to the strong opiate of unknown forces manipulating human actors in spite of themselves, one never recovers from it and persists in ignoring every day more and more what actors themselves say. Yes, religion is the opium but not of the people, it is the opium that put social scientists readily to sleep at the very moment when those they are in charge of studying are being *made to act* by others. It would take one hundred Garfinkels to awaken social scientists from this deontological slumber : to sleep, perchance to dream, that you provide explanations more apt than the account given by people for *why* they act, why they are acted upon.<sup>26</sup>

Needless to say, when this method of explaining away religion was used for (I should say ‘against’) science, it failed pitifully because you can not possibly separate the scientists from the entities which (they claim) make them act. If priests and monks and common folks did not scream when sociology of religion took their divinities away, scientists did scream when science studies claimed to account for their ‘belief’ without taking into the things themselves they were talking about — and they were right ! Pretending that the entities of science make ‘no difference’ to what scientists say about them, is so patently absurd that it should have killed social explanations of science from day one.<sup>27</sup> One of the reasons why it was not dead at birth, I propose now, is that, then, social scientists would have had to also abandon this implausible type of explanation for *every other*

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<sup>26</sup> The basis of the ethnospsychiatry cure developed by T. Nathan *L'influence qui guérit*. (Paris, Editions Odile Jacob, 1994) is precisely to reverse this tendency.

<sup>27</sup> On why it did not, see D. Bloor. “Anti-Latour.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 30, 1 (1999): 81-112 and my response.



field of inquiry, *including* religion —their ideal-type of antifetishism.

A powerful antidote to the antifetishism of the social sciences, is to consider, on the contrary, that, in human fields of inquiry, what people explicitly state as the cause of their actions, is probably the best source we have to understand it —especially if we grasp the great number of foreign, non-human entities which are mixed with human behaviour; yet this notion was so radical for the anti-religious and pro-scientific (and lately antiscientific spirit) of the social sciences, that they preferred to stick to their belief in belief and went on providing antifetishist ‘explanations’ of the worship of fetishes —without realising that no one in the whole history of humankind has ever worshipped a fetish in the way iconoclasts have believed,<sup>28</sup> without realising that this belief is entirely limited to the scholarly reaction against all forms of religion, a passing moment in the history of the social sciences.

One should not, however, entirely despair of the social sciences. Things are fortunately entirely different if, taking the cue from science studies, scholars begin to apply the same type of non social explanations to religious matters. This is the decisive stance inaugurated by the anthropologist Elizabeth Claverie<sup>29</sup> and put to good use in a remarkable book by the Belgian sociologist Albert Piette on a French catholic parish.<sup>30</sup> The alternative to social explanation of beliefs is of course not the downright acceptance of theology, no more than the critique of social studies of science is a wholesale sell off to epistemology and its diverse forms of realism (both traditions, by the way, fusing in some physicists dream of being themselves God or at least His intimate counsellors). On the contrary, this is where the lack of taste, the lack of tact, the lack of empirical grasp of the antifetishist reveals itself so markedly. If only the social scientists had not discarded so swiftly the entities which actors explicitly say make them act, and had not replaced them by unknown forces which, they believe, make the actors behave, they would have perceived the extraordinarily different ontological status of those entities —Virgin, saints, miracles and gods— from the one imputed by belief in belief. It is precisely this multiplicity in what makes us act, in modes of action, that I call *factishes*, by fusing the two words of fact and fetishes and paying once more attention to what, in any form of action, *overtakes* action.<sup>31</sup>

When Albert Piette becomes attentive, in a thoroughly constructivist (not social constructivist) stance, to the many ways in which contemporary French provincial Catholicism is lived, he finds almost no instance, in

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<sup>28</sup> A similar point is made in M. Taussig *Defacement. Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> E. Claverie. “La Vierge, le désordre, la critique.” *Terrain*, 14 (1990): 60-75 ; “Voir apparaître, regarder voir.” *Raisons Pratiques*, 2 (1991): 1-19.

<sup>30</sup> A. Piette *La religion de près. L'activité religieuse en train de se faire*. (Paris, Métailié, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> B. Latour. “Factures/fractures. From the Concept of Network to the Concept of Attachment.” *Res*, 36 (1999): 20-31.

several years of field work, of a single one of those beliefs supposedly occupying the mind and heart of the believers. God is thoroughly hidden in many contradictory practices where He or It appears elusive, fractional, polytheistic, weak, uncertain, even in burial ceremonies or during masses. This should not be so surprising after what I have said about the difference between representation and re-representation. Augustin's positioning of God in his *Confessions* is exactly as contradictory : the immutable God to whom he is talking is also supposed to undergo many mutable passions, desires, wills and providential acts. The same is true of Claverie's work on pilgrimages where pilgrims actually photograph the apparitions of the Virgin Mary and discuss endlessly the shapes appearing in their Polaroid's without insisting very much on eliciting the ontological status of an obdurately long-lasting Virgin Mary. They speak of what is (for me) images of clouds upon clouds, and not of one enduring substance as the entity converting them. Religion in general is not about long lasting substances.

So where is belief coming from if it is nowhere to be seen in religious practice, when studied by social scientists freed from antifetishism ? Strangely enough, belief is patterned under the model of science. If we untie the notion, belief is conceived as a vehicle for access *to something* through transformation, typical of scientific inscriptions, only that the object of access is said to be hidden. The belief in belief is thus a charitable construction using the method of science to understand what it is to access something far away in space-time, *except that there is no terminus*. Belief is an imitation of knowledge without ground. Hence the endless and meaningless questions « Do you believe in God or not ? » patterned against the question « Do you believe in global warming or not ? ». The latter can be given a terminus whereas the former cannot. Asking this type of question (« Do you believe that you see the Virgin in those Polaroid's ? ») to persons who are construed thus as 'believers' is for the religious speech-act, a condition of infelicity. Religion is not about belief in anything special to which one could gain access by saying 'yes' *in spite* of many doubts about its reality. Although this sounds counterintuitive, religion should not and never was defined by beliefs in things absent and distant, invisible and beyond. God is not the object of a belief-action. Faith and belief have nothing to say to one another, nor need the faithful and believers to coincide.

Let's be more radical : to phrase the religious speech-act in terms of beliefs is to contravene the third commandment, it is to speak in vain the name of God —a sin, a mortal sin I am told. Better to have one's tongue cut off than utter this curse. To be fair, many religious minds have committed this sin by accepting, during the science-religious wars of the past, this definition of belief as grasping the ungraspable or accessing the inaccessible. Unable to express anew their faith, once faced with the powerful intrusion of the newly discovered referential chains, they fell back into a belief in something they call 'suprasensible', as if they could emulate the vehicle of science and go even further to the suprasensible. As if there

were a suprasensible, a world of beyond, a second chance, an afterlife! As if religion had anything to do with dreams of an afterworld! Non-believers began to believe that they really had to believe due to the critical pressure exerted by believers (their critics) who really believed they and only they did *not* believe ! What a comedy of errors.

The paradox of the method introduced so magisterially by Elizabeth Claverie, is that when you at last take seriously the objects of belief — against the long disrepute they had suffered because of antifetishism— far from shining with a glorious independence, those objects begin to circulate inside totally implausible networks, occupying positions that neither theology care to recognise nor sociology to follow, so different are they from the traditional Church doctrine and from the ideology of a social explanation through hidden infrastructures. As Piette suggests : « God is not a very demanding entity ». Where sociology of religion leads us, angels fear to tread.

Science students like myself should not be surprised by this turn of events : the situation is exactly the same as the one revealed by so much of our work: once the noise made by epistemology and social explanations are toned down, the delicate music made by scientists with their hundred nuances of realism may at last be heard.<sup>32</sup> The many ways in which scientists intricate themselves with their subjects-objects of study have become so bewildering that it will take decades before we can begin to map them out. Science studies has completely renewed the repertoire of practical metaphysics entertained by the sciences —in spite of the shabby repertoire claimed by modernist grand narratives. Similarly, we can imagine how long it will take for social scientists to begin to map the ways in which people are made to act by Virgins, UFOS, Gods, fetishes, divinities, once we stop using the repertoire of antifetishism.<sup>33</sup>

When will we be at last able to entertain in the social sciences some real form of *agnosticism*, meaning the abandonment of belief as a rightful way of accounting for any attitude ? When, moreover, will we be able to entertain a coherent form of *atheism*, that is to accept that the ordinary way of talking about religion today is through common sense atheism, which performs the same role as the common sense powerful Gods of a bygone past ? Yes, we can now say without fear of criticism, agnosticism and atheism are good resources for the social sciences provided the first means suspending any form of antifetishism and the second to seriously begin to pay attention to the ‘former power of religion’.

### **An effort at retranslation**

How to bring this discussion to a close ? Words are missing. Not

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<sup>32</sup> See P. Galison *Image and Logic. A Material Culture of Microphysics*. (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1997), the last chapter of I. Hacking *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1999) and above all K. Knorr-Cetina *Epistemic Cultures. How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> E. Gomart *Surprised by Methadone. Thèse de doctorat*. (Paris Ecole des Mines 1999).

because what is being signified is ineffable, as it is often so leniently claimed, but because the ‘immediacy of assent’ has been lost. The deficit in translations — this mounting arrears of transformation in what there is to say — is too great whether in the camp of religion or in the camp of its enemies (if we insist on talking about camps for a few moments more). But if I do not attempt to find the words, I would have lost the occasion to renew *hic et nunc* for you and for me the chance of re-representing the representation. And there is no more opportune moment than this one, no other *kairos*, to understand what is performed by the religious speech-acts I can’t delay it. I have no choice. Why? Because, if I spoke otherwise, I would try to designate something absent, another moment in the past or in the future, another spot in space, and then I would be talking not about you, now, but about those other than you or those other darker parts in you. *And then I would be lying*. Religious talk, as we begin to see, cannot be about anything other than what is present. It is about the present, not about the past nor about the future. It speaks when we no longer strive for goals, far away places, novel information, strong interests, as though all had been replaced by a much stronger sort of urgency : it speaks of now, of us, of final achievements that are for now, not for later. Religious talk has the strange property of considering only mediators and not intermediaries acting as vehicles for accessing something which is absent.

My formulation seems odd at first, because we are accustomed to considering religion in the manner of “a belief in something” and to fall into a form of speech that opposes this base material world of present empirical stuff with a more spiritual and detached absent world of beyond. But we have now understood that this way of locating the power of religion has become meaningless because it distracts attention toward absent and non-existing substances. As soon as one does so, the spirit of religious language wither on one's tongue. No matter how counterintuitive it might appear at first, the taste for present materiality is much stronger in religion than in any other form of life because it exclusively and obsessively designates the putting into presence, the actual and final realisation of goals. «Times are accomplished». It is not in vain that the word incarnation has been used to describe this reconcentration on the presence. With religion, it is always : “back to the flesh”.

In order to attempt to become again more familiar with this simple evidence, let’s consider two layers of expression, one completely outdated and the other still alive, although marginalized, inside European cultures.

The first one is the fable of the Annunciation represented in perhaps a million images throughout the centuries : ‘I am the servant of the Lord’, says the Virgin (or is said to have said in Luke’s invention of this episode) and the acceptance of the presence of presence transforms her in someone who harbours the presence of God, not metaphorically, but really, since she is made pregnant, and not of a God of beyond, but of a God now in the human flesh. There exists now in *this* world not in the next, in *this* local place, in *this* humble bosom, a reserve of definitive and final presence.

Now, let us not attempt the horrific : let's not apply to this fable the truth detector invented by the belief in belief: the story will die with the implantation of the first electrode. If you begin to ask «was there a Mary ? »,«was she really a Virgin ? », «did the angel speak Greek or Aramean ? », «what biomanipulation made her pregnant», we would immediately turn our attention away to completely irrelevant questions. We would commit the same mistake (that is commit the same sin of inattention) if, in a sort of misplaced realism, we were to try to convince others that Luke did not invent this episode. He (or some other author to whom Luke's label is attributed) did invent it, no question about it, but is it a good or a bad invention? that is, did the story elaborate a re-representation of what there was to say, or did it rationalise it away by inventing a more realistic episode to justify a belief?<sup>34</sup> It will not do either to try to purge the Scriptures of every single element which is not well attested, because then we would end up with a few obscure *Ur-aramean* sentences uttered by a ghostly 'Ieshoua'. We would have obtained purity but nothing to say (as Whitehead again says : « Man does not live on bread alone, but he does not live on disinfectants either ! »). What we want is to regain an understanding of every wave of invention without abandoning a single one of them, and not reach for an impossible purity, an original clarity disengaged from all later historical elaborations, embellishments, and outright pious lies. What we want to be able to grasp is the whole *modus operandi* again, the generator of so many 'pious lies'.

Despite a long-standing interest in Biblical exegesis, I have no authority to express the original truth of this text. But since the text pertains to everyone, I can do exactly as Luke did and elaborate, embroider, expand, retranslate, rationalise, betray, by adding to this ancient layer another much more common one and see if the superposition of both will not generate the flash, the spark, that is the only real content of the word 'spiritual' in religious speech-acts, its only true origin.

It must have happened to all of you to hear a word that has turned you from a dead absent-minded, goal-anxious non-entity into an alert, present, alive person. There are words, expressions, gestures, usually but not always associated with what we call 'love talk', which deeply modify the passage of time and the feeling of what it is to be a person. It is sometimes a very transitory and tenuous experience or a definitive and durable transformation, but what is sure is that the *content* of the words uttered is not crucially important: neither their elegance, nor their information capacity, or their novelty count. « I love you » is as boringly repetitive as the millions of Annunciations that fill our museums' walls. And yet, this does not mean that those forms of speech are meaningless or indifferent ; on the contrary, everyone knows exactly (but with what sort of

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<sup>34</sup> As Bultman has shown long ago, rationalisation and mythification go together, the second one filling in more episodes to answer the logical urges of the first. It is well known in mythology, where the most recent versions of historical episodes are always those with the most details.

exactness ?) when they are well said and badly said, truthful and deceitful. The advantage of love talk is that it is utterly down to earth, down to sex, and that they are not, in spite of a lot of romantic exaggeration, prone to be distorted by belief in belief and access to a world of beyond.

I don't claim that you can reduce personhood to what happens when you are being addressed by the offer, by the gift, by the *present* of a form of speech that makes you present instead of absent, alive instead of dead, alert instead of distant. Personhood is obviously made of so many layers of law, politics, narratives of self, authorship, the unconscious, identity cards, physiological knowledge, that no form of life can be said to create it from scratch. And yet, it is understandable with the 'immediacy of assent' requested by Whitehead, that those who have never felt the present of presence that we call love are not persons in the sense that they are not fulfilled, the fulfilment of time has never occurred to them, they remain in absence and distance and sorrow and angst.

Why did I establish a short circuit between the outdated tale of Annunciation and contemporary love-talk ? I should not lose heart at this concluding moment, and yet it is so perilously difficult that I might fail entirely to re-represent the power of religion.

I am not saying that the Annunciation's gesture of acceptance and generation of ever present God, is 'explained' by the temporary expedient of speaking in terms of love-talk. This would be performing the rather indecent act of offering an apologetic explanation, refreshing old stories by the sugar coating of a fresh one. I am not interested in proving that Luke's fable is right. On the other hand, I am not so debased as to say that the Annunciation story is nothing but a 'figure of speech' to say « I love you » in a more cosmic and universal idiom than love-talk which has become in our age heavily psychologized and individualized. This would be close to blasphemy in spite of a theological insistence on using the word 'Love' to code God and one's neighbour.<sup>35</sup> I am not either pretending that, across the mutations of centuries, a single content has remained intact despite the many strange or ordinary stories in which it might be have been cast, and that what our two stories mean is 'simply' the abstract concept of 'person in presence'. This would be doing a sort of Kantian rationalisation of 'religion within the limits of strict reason'. Religion (no more than reason, by the way) cannot resist breaking the limits of rationalism for there is nothing more foreign to its speech-act than remaining constant over centuries through *indifferent* modes of expression. As every lover knows so well : the mode of expression, the tone, is *everything* and the information content of what is uttered is nothing. So, to look for the rational kernel in religious lessons apart from the many extravagant modes of expressions

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<sup>35</sup> For once, French is richer than English since it uses the beautiful word '*le prochain*' which is different from '*le voisin*' to mean that, in a religious speech act, we are never talking about someone far away; but English, strangely enough, ignores the difference between the neighbour that is close by ethnicity or proximity and the stranger that has been *made* a neighbour by some act of charity.

handed down through history, is more than meaningless.

So what have I done, if I am claiming that I am saying none of these three things? It is easier to say negatively what I mean because the redirection of attention is an essential feature of those performative speech-acts, the only one left to us (this is what is so characteristic in religious images).<sup>36</sup> What I am saying is different: by inventing the Annunciation tale somewhere in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the author of Luke's Gospel did something to his audience that made them understand anew what they were meaning by 'God incarnated', which made them re-understand what was meant by "Times are accomplished, the Kingdom of Heaven has arrived", something which we no longer, centuries later, understand but that Luke made resoundingly clear—for a specific time and for a specific audience—by superimposing those three different layers of expression.

This is the more difficult moment of my peroration: by superimposing today those different layers of expression -- love-talk, the metaphysics of presence, the charming and venerable Annunciation fable -- I have done (or rather, I would have done, had I had the nerve to give a sermon and not a lecture), today, to you, the same thing that Luke did to re-represent the power of a religious speech act. This is after all the very definition of a sermon: the recasting of what was already said through different means of expression.

Had I succeeded, a lightning connection would have been established between those ancient dead venerable texts and our congregation today. A connection which would have ignored the passage of time and established some sort of union, of communion between those to whom Luke speaks, Luke himself, and us, here, today. If you find indecent to establish a relation between those glorious times and saintly Fathers and our time, our clumsy and impotent souls, don't forget that no matter how great they were, they are dead and we are alive, so the duty of re-presenting Presence weighs on our shoulders no matter how miserable we are, not on their dead bones.<sup>37</sup> But because I have certainly failed, you will conclude that the speaker who used to be a hard boiled critical scholar has become raving mad, and I will conclude that I have committed the mortal sin of uttering in vain the name of God by failing to produce the 'immediacy of assent' which is so essential to its right evocation.

Amen.

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<sup>36</sup> For Catholic renaissance images, see the remarkable L. Marin *Opacité de la peinture. Essais sur la représentation*. (Paris, Usher, 1989), and the more recent G. Didi-Huberman *Fra Angelico. Dissemblance et figuration*. (Paris, Flammarion, 1990). For the Protestant control of pictures, see J. L. Koerner. "L'image dans la Réforme et les pratiques de la croyance moderne." *Les Cahiers du MNAM* Hiver 1998, 66 (1998): 95-124.

<sup>37</sup> This is one of the essential themes of C. Péguy *Clio Dialogue de l'histoire et de l'âme païenne. Oeuvres en prose*. (Paris, La Pléiade, Gallimard 1961).