

## Feature

# Faith *and* image

Rowan Williams and Neil MacGregor discuss the significance of images in the lives of the faithful

RW: *We're going to be talking a bit about faith and the visual imagination, the world of images, and we're going to begin by thinking about one of the central paradoxes or problems that we face in looking at this subject. Christianity inherited from the Jewish world a suspicion, a caution about images. Images of God but even images of the human. And one of the most interesting questions is: how did a faith which began with that caution, that wariness about visual images, come to be the faith that covered the face of Europe with artistic achievement of one kind or another? And one of the questions we'll be looking at is really whether in that process something happened to faith itself that was a bit ambivalent, a bit problematic. What does the image do to the faith, or the faith do to the image? And I think the first images that we're going to be thinking about are really a reminder that there are images that aren't just pictures, that aren't just depictions of something.*

NM: This image [on the right] stands for the whole Islamic tradition of making the word itself into an object of visual delight and fascination. This artist is Egyptian and British and what he's showing is a representation of the 99 names of God – the beautiful names of Allah – and the names which the faithful may use to call on him, set among other words which the faithful recite. And there's a long tradition of looking at the word, as well as hearing it, a tradition which I think was lost fairly early, if it ever existed at all, in the Christian tradition.

RW: *Certainly the idea that the word itself could be a visual object of beauty and elegance isn't absent from Christianity. If you think of the great carpet pages in the Book of Kells then quite clearly the decorative word, the intense concentration on making the word itself a thing of beauty, is there. But it never has that kind of central canonical role that it has in Islam where the prohibition about images remains in full force throughout Islamic history really.*

NM: What I find interesting about this as a representative example is the way a tradition that doesn't have figurative imagery can inhabit the word – you talk about the manuscript tradi-

tion, of course – but the tradition of the mosque and in some cases the whole physical structure of the mosque carrying the word, so that you inhabit the word in a way that is not really possible in our tradition other than in a rather impoverished version of the word in the church. But I don't think anybody would argue that the Ten Commandments set out like this was ever meant to be an aesthetic experience.

RW: *I think that's right, it's very much part of one strand of a Western approach to this, that what you see in church ought to be instructional. Whereas I think in what you so well call the inhabiting of the word that you see in the Muslim world the word itself is the energy, the presence of the divine. It's what really does surround you, what really does soak through you. It's not there just for instruction, it's there for contemplation, for absorption, not as a kind of reminder of the things you ought to be doing or believing. I think it's more than that in Islam.*

NM: And once a faith has decided it's going to represent things, and is going to use the visual figurative image as a way of exploring or teaching doctrine then it seems to me you get into a whole range of difficulties that we're still not really at the end of. Of what the image can do that the word can't; what the image can't do; and also where the image leads us in its own life, which is separate from the life of the word.

RW: *Yes, it's I suppose because for the Muslim world the word is not in that sense made flesh. Christians will say, as they've said in the controversies about images in the Eastern Christian empire in the early centuries, Christians want to say, 'well, God has spoken but has spoken in this particular bit of flesh and blood'. And that means that those particular bits of flesh and blood that are associated with that event themselves carry energy and action from God in a certain way.*

NM: What I thought might be a way, before we move onto images of Jesus or whatever, just to look at, for a moment, the limits of what the image can do and particularly in a tradition where the biblical language of paradox, of

metaphor, most obviously in the parables – where what's going on in the words is different from what's happening – the difficulties of this are shown very clearly if you look at the 17th-century Venetian artist Domenico Fetti's series of parables. I think, looking across the Fetti parables how difficult it is to translate a tradition of words into images. My favourite example of it is this one, which is actually the mote and the beam. And I think you can see it becomes a completely ridiculous image. That idea of the speck of dust and the beam which works so well in language; it's impossible to look at this and still feel spiritual uplift rather than just wishing that he'd chosen a different parable. I think there's something quite profound here that these are different worlds of thinking, different ways of thinking that it intersects dangerously sometimes.

RW: *I think there are two things at least about the parables of Jesus in the New Testament. One is, as you say they use paradox and metaphor very intensely (like the mote and the beam). They use verbal exaggeration, a deliberate invocation of absurdity. Jesus comes after all in a tradition of verbal wit and playfulness which went on being part of the Jewish rabbinical world for a long time. The second thing is that of course the parables are dramas. You have to ask yourself a question about where are you in the story. Where do you belong as the relationships and challenges unfold? You're put in a different position, you're addressed in different ways. And you can't capture that in one picture. Jesus says, 'So who do you think you are in this? Where are you going to put yourself in this?'*

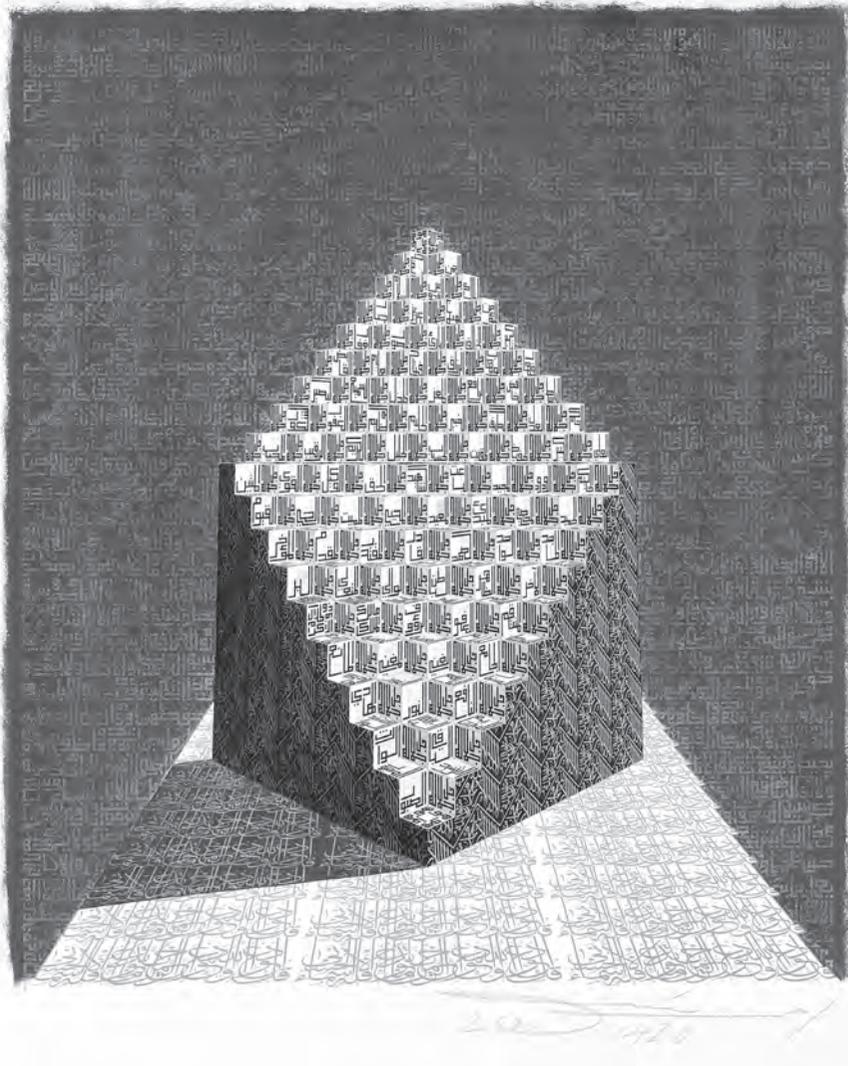
NM: I think that's a key point, that the spectator in the Western tradition has only one place. As you say the point of the parable is to shift the place of the person engaged. But there's another bigger problem, isn't there, that, as you say, so much of that language is about paradox and the deliberate co-existence of impossibles. I'm thinking of things like the image of Jesus as the shepherd but also as the lamb which in words works so powerfully but is completely impossible to

render in an image. But it's impossible to have those two conflicting essences in the same image isn't it?

RW: *That's right. And I think one of the interesting things about early Christian art and to some extent Eastern Christian art is that it tries to do something of the paradox in visual form – and we're going to be looking at the Hinton St Mary's mosaic in a moment – a very early Romano-British representation of Christ with the monogram, the chairo – XP CHR – beginnings of the word 'Christ' behind his head, clearly modelled in some way on images of the sun god, indebted a bit to images of royal authority. But at the same time this is somebody wearing a very very simple costume and when you see something similar in mosaics that are a little bit later on, very obviously dressed as a philosopher, a wandering teacher, a plain tunic which is sort of wrapped round the shoulders and the sort of unfashionable long hair and beard of a philosopher or sage.*

The point being that when you come into one of the great basilicas of the late Roman Empire and you see a mosaic of Christ enthroned at the far end you're looking to the place where normally the emperor would sit. The emperor would be sitting there either dressed in his armour or dressed in cloth of gold with a diadem round his head. So you're looking towards the throne, but who's on the throne? This rather curious and disreputable wandering teacher. So you have a bit of a paradox in visual form there. The person who holds the emperor's authority in cosmic terms is not just another soldier or an administrator wearing uniform but a wandering sage, a philosopher, a teacher. So something there is being said which is at least on the edge of paradox and it's been suggested, I think quite credibly, that some of that tradition of representing Jesus, borrows from the ways in which late classical art used to depict Plato the philosopher or Homer the poet. So it's a poet, a philosopher, it's a wordsmith actually who's sitting on the throne.

NM: It's very interesting what you said about the position in the basilica where he's clearly in an imperial spot. What I find interesting about this one which is certainly the oldest representation of Jesus in Britain, and one of the oldest in existence, is that it comes from a dining room in Dorset and it was on the floor of the dining room. And I do find that very puzzling. We know it was paralleled with an image of Belerophon overcoming the monster so presumably we're looking at ways of recovering good from evil. And I presume the pomegranate is



Ahmed Moustafa *The Attributes of Divine Perfection* 2000

some kind of reference to Orpheus or to the underworld and Persephone. But the idea of having the image of your God on the floor of the dining room is I think a problem that only images have; words don't have this problem. We know it was a real one because there is a letter in edict that prevents this: you're not allowed to show Christ on the floor but at that stage of course, even Britain had decided to leave Europe – or rather the Romans had decided to leave us! – and it survived.

RW: *And it's partly to do with the fact that at this juncture Christian communities don't quite know what to do with images. They haven't got churches, they haven't got basilicas.*

NM: What I find puzzling about this is how you would have, at the end of the 4th Century, responded to this. It's quite clearly in no sense meant to be a portrait of Jesus. It's an idea of Jesus given visual form. Does that reflect the way you respond as a worshipper?

RW: *That's a very interesting question, because it takes us back to what you think*

*you're doing in representing. If you think representation is copying or reproducing, quite clearly, there is no way you can do this as a religious believer. Not even if you think you are reproducing what Jesus looked like when he was on earth. If on the other hand you think 'I need to find some kind of vehicle which will put me in touch with the action that underlies and sustains these events', then of course you won't necessarily look for a realistic picture. And as Eastern Christian art, in particular, develops, you have a lot of very complicated negotiating around this. No, you don't want to represent just the human facts, but nor do you want to take refuge in abstract representations. You need something that has a kind of, almost a diagram-like, relationship to what you're talking about so that looking how the space is used, looking how the image works visually, you are put in touch with something, but you mustn't think it's a copy.*

NM: So, the Hinton St Mary Christ is in that sense at the beginning or a part of a tradition that becomes the Eastern Orthodox tradition, as it were a visual code for Jesus.

RW: Yes, I think a visual code is a good way of putting it. It's not completely divorced from the fact that we're talking about a specific human being, but in the language that was used a few centuries later, in Eastern Christianity, you're looking for a kind of human figure, who is visibly soaked through with the action, with the light, the energy of God. So that's a tradition that moves on with more and more sophistication in the Middle Ages, to attempts to depict how, somehow, this bit of the world that is Jesus, or this bit of the world that is a Holy Person, radiates. You can see the light being used in a certain way, the light streams out at you. It's not that you are trying to find a figure on whom the light falls, the light comes at you. So, you're well away from representation in the crude sense there.

NM: Which of course is because one of the problems for post-Renaissance European painting where the desire is more and more to give the illusion of reality and therefore images like this one – which I think go to the heart of this, don't they – this is a 15th-century Netherlandish representation. It is an illustration of a very significant forgery, which Rowan knows more about than I, the letter of Lentulus, who alleged that he was in Roman-Palastine and he saw Jesus and wrote a description. And it is an attempt to validate the figure that has already become the familiar one. But definitely an attempt by the Western church to present a portrait of Jesus, isn't it?

RW: It is and it's a very curious piece of writing and is certainly a description of what had already become the routine way of representing Jesus. And in a rather eccentric way, tries to say 'well, all along these rather ritualised representations of Jesus that we got used to are really based on a portrait. They are really just realistic depictions.' And I'm not at all sure what the theology of that is, its as if in order to relate to Jesus you have to have something approaching a photographic record which would have been very eccentric in earlier centuries.

NM: I wanted to ask you about that, because once you have the convention which, – I mean the fact that we all recognise this immediately and that we have this documentary, albeit bogus documentary, authentication signed on the back of the passport photograph, saying this is him – what does that do to the way you can use this as an image of Jesus for contemplation and meditation? Does it change your relationship?

RW: Well I think it does rather, because, I think if what you are looking for is a sort of photographic representation – 'this is what Jesus really looked like', the danger then is having the image as an object that you possess, you sort of take it out and – 'Ah' – look at it and think of it in the way you would of a photograph of a grandchild. Whereas the point of the icon in the Eastern church is that it is never passive, you are the one that is being looked at there and to come in front of an icon is to look in the eye, almost literally, a presence bearing down on you. You don't imagine that it's something you can just look at, because you are being looked at.

NM: Could that argue that this tradition allows a more equal dialogue between worshipper and Jesus, than the Orthodox one? When you are in a sense the subject of the ruler?

RW: I suppose you could, but I'm a bit inclined to say that, as a worshipper I'm not really interested in equal dialogue! That's not what I'm there for as a worshipper, I'm there to be looked at, I'm there to be judged, I'm there to be transformed. That I suppose is why I have a real religious problem with some late medieval and renaissance art. I can admire it, but I find it very hard to contemplate it in that sense.

NM: Because it's also so committed to the idea of being a narrative, which seems to me to raise one of the really fundamental problems about the decision in the West not just to go for some realistic visual tradition, by the Western church to use images as such a key part of their way of teaching and presenting the gospel and the teaching of Jesus. So much of the central idea cannot be represented in paint.

RW: Going back to what I was saying about the earliest depictions of Christ in the basilicas, what you've got there is, in a way, a representation of Christ the teacher, here's the philosopher sitting on the throne. And what that says among other things, is what matters in the universe is the wisdom of God. Not so much the power of God, even, as the wisdom of God. And it can be a kind of door opening, into asking 'well what does that wisdom ask of us?' and you're into the teaching here and now. That is a different relationship from this rather melodramatic depiction of somebody who might be almost anybody just sounding off in a dramatic landscape.

NM: I think one of the consequences of that is that because most people don't find this very spiritually rewarding and it'd be difficult really to use as contemplation, or whatever, the focus overwhelmingly in the Western pictorial tradition is on the body of Christ,

and the bit you can paint, not only the nativity and the infancy but above all the Passion, where you can find images for every stage and every moment. The image I wanted to choose next is this one from Utrecht. It's a little smaller than life size and it's a representation of a moment in the Passion, which is not, I think, in the text at all but which if you imagine the Passion must have occurred, when Jesus having carried the cross is sitting at Calvary waiting to be nailed. So we have to imagine that as he's sitting, totally naked, the cross is being prepared and he is completely alone, and it's a moment of absolute destitution which the Northern European piety focuses on Christ on the cold stone, a moment of the absolute destitution of Christ. Does this allow a kind of engagement which is of a different sort from the Eastern tradition and one that is, in your terms, more fruitful?

RW: I think there is something about this image which invites a response more forcefully than just the average depiction, either of Christ's portrait or of the Passion in itself. And I say that partly because, it was a statue like this, which made all the difference in the life of St Teresa of Avila in the 16th Century. She describes in her autobiography how she was in the cloister of her convent one day, having had 20 odd years as an average rather dull nun, and suddenly saw this image, or something very similar to this image, as if for the first time, and said 'I'm being called by the loneliness of this figure, here is someone who is in fact saying "I need you".' And she realised that she had to do something, to be alongside, to be in company with this suffering figure who was demanding attention, really claiming something. So yes there is something here that isn't in some of the more familiar images.

NM: To go back to your earlier points then, when I talked about the possibility that the Western tradition opens up of an equal relationship with Jesus, which you said as a worshipper you weren't interested in. That is what this demands, in a sense, isn't it? We are partly nature's response I think as to a fellow human being, at a moment of ultimate distress in his ultimate humanity.

RW: But I think what makes it different for somebody like St Teresa responding, is what is claimed from me is not a feeling of compassion towards this figure, it's the change of a life. Because the authority invested in this figure, is something, which has that claim on my entire life.



Hinton St Mary Mosaic, early 4th Century  
 Courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum

NM: I want to go a bit further on that question because when this statue was in the National Gallery in 2000 for the exhibition on 'Images of Christ: Seeing Salvation', it was set on its own without a barrier in the middle of the room and the impact on visitors was quite extraordinary. Several visitors actually put their coat around it, to keep him warm – so moved, so feeling the need to make a gesture of compassion, which seems to me a proper response to this image. But very strikingly I received a letter from a woman who had seen it and been moved by it, and who had then on her way home met a beggar on the street and for the first time in her life had actually stopped and spoken to the beggar. I suppose one of the questions that this tradition of imagery raises, which is not one of the Eastern traditions, is the proper role of emotion in engaging with the incarnation.

I found, and I'm sure others have the same experience, taking visitors from the far east, from a Buddhist or Hindu tradition, round the National Gallery, they are bewildered and

shocked and appalled by the contemplation of pain, and the purpose of it, and whether there is a purpose of it. But in a sense, you can argue that this proper visual articulation of a theology of the atonement, isn't it? That, if Christ's suffering has to be great enough to atone for everybody, it has to be unbearable and distressing. And that's what a lot of the written theology of the atonement seeks to achieve, or is that unfair?

RW: *I think there is a very powerful tradition, which would endorse that, and I have a lot of questions about it. I think what that presupposes is that Christ's suffering was effective because it, as human suffering, is the worst kind of thing you can imagine. Therefore if you are going to depict it you pile it on. But I would say that theologically, the point is not that Jesus redeems the world because his suffering is so much more horrible than anyone else's. Think about it for a moment and think about the kind of human suffering that there are, and you can't say that. The point is not the intensity of the suffering, the point is who is suffering. And somebody like St Anselm, early in the Middle*

*Ages, would say that the point is that this is a suffering undertaken out of a unique unconditional love, a divine love. And that's what makes a difference, not the turning up the temperature of human suffering.*

Rowan Williams and Neil MacGregor were speaking at the Hay Festival on 28 May 2013. An audio recording of the event will be downloadable from the Hay Festival website from September 2013 - [www.hayfestival.com/archive/](http://www.hayfestival.com/archive/) and a full transcript can be downloaded from the ACE website.

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#### Editorial

ACE's editorial writers are on holiday.

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