

The image, the ear and the eye in early Christianity

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THE IMAGE, THE EAR AND THE EYE IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

L'un des débats les plus intéressants des études actuelles de la tradition intellectuelle occidentale concerne le statut des sens à certaines périodes de l'histoire; et l'intérêt porté au problème du texte et de l'image est en relation avec celui-ci. Ces questions constituent le contexte du présent article, dont le propos est d'interroger la relation problématique du II^e au VI^e siècle.

I. The context: the image, the word and the rivalry of the senses

The Reformation is usually perceived as word-based and iconoclastic; and there is some justification for such an assessment. This is partly because the iconoclasm associated with the Reform was a suspicion of images as such. There seems to have been a fear of images, as capable of preventing faith, which is quite general, and which has its source in the Decalogue. To the extent that this is true it must be the more direct stimulus to iconoclasm. However a less direct but also important motivation, and one more immediately relevant to the theme of this paper, is the reformation theological principle of *fides ex auditu*, that faith comes from hearing, and which produces an apparent stress on the ear.

Luther's great theme, and his preoccupation with the idea of the word of God, made him very concerned with the oral character of Scripture. "The Gospel should not be Scripture but the spoken word which explains the Scripture ... Christ himself wrote nothing but only spoke."¹

1. See Luther's *Lectures on Romans*, particularly ch. 10. For the quotation see W. A. 10, 1. 1; 17, 7-12.

This theology of Luther, and his exhortation to put your ears where your eyes are, was carried on in Calvin. "The use of the tongue and ears is to lead us into the truth by means of God's word... Faith cometh by hearing, as St. Paul says. Seeing that God ordained our ears to so excellent a use as to lift us up to heaven to behold our God... should we play as deaf men and stop our ears?"²

We have here then apparently a theological rivalry between faculties and the senses, and a privileging by Christian theology, at least in that of the Reformation, of hearing and the ear. This takes place within a context of the discussion of the nature of faith. This is an important point and we shall return to it presently. But the rivalry which is presented in this way is something that needs a fuller explanation, and in fact a different history.

This is particularly true in the light of the contemporary cultural debates, referred to above, which tend to reinforce the same idea. I have in mind controversies such as those within art history between linguistic and psychological models of representation;³ or the preoccupation in cultural analyses of European intellectual history with the idea of vision, understood as the master sense of the modern era. Such ideas can be found in the recent and fascinating book *Downcast Eyes* by the cultural historian and critic, Martin Jay.⁴

In this study Jay documents and discusses what he sees as the rise of a denigration of vision in modern French thinking, as a protest against what is interpreted as the eye-centered culture of the Western tradition. In this thinking, classical Greece is regarded as having established the hegemony of the eye from which now we all suffer. He draws attention also to the rediscovery in post-modernism of the legacy of Judaism, through the influence on Lyotard of Emmanuel Levinas, whose critique of the eye he discusses at length.⁵

Levinas favoured Jewish attitudes, understood as a religion of the word given only to the ear, over what he saw as a Hellenic concern

2. *Sermons on Job*, 33. 29 f. For the quotation and translation see T. F. TORRANCE, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, London, 1949, p. 77-78.

3. See for example N. BRYSON, "Semiology and Visual Interpretation", in *Visual Theory*, ed. N. Bryson, M. A. Holly and K. Moxey, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991. E. GOMBRICH, *Art and Illusion*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1977. See also M. ROSKILL, *The Interpretation of Pictures*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989.

4. M. JAY, *Downcast Eyes*, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1993.

5. M. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 546 f.

with sight, resulting in a philosophy of intelligible form and light based on vision. In view of this he also distinguished Judaism as an ethical religion based on hearing and obeying commandments, from a Greek style interested in ontology.

Within Christian theology thinkers such as Jacques Ellul have also protested against, as he puts it, "the humiliation of the word". Ellul considers that, properly understood, Christianity is also inimical to visual hegemony. One of his leading themes, which he emphasises repeatedly, is that of language as constitutive of the human being and as that of God's mode of communication with us.⁶ This results in an argument that devaluation of language means devaluation of God. Thus the French anti-ocular critique, and the forms it has taken in Anglo-saxon writing since the 1970s, have raised, as Jay puts it, important and difficult questions concerning the history and the relative importance of visuality in the primary cultural traditions of the West.⁷

Of these traditions Christianity is undoubtedly the most important. In so far therefore as these debates bear on Christian theology and history, I should like to examine the questions they raise with regard to the Christian tradition, and to analyse one historical area, that of the early Christian period, from about 100 A. D. to 600 A. D. The reason for choosing this period is because, amid the various claims concerning the status of the senses in certain ages, the early Church is not discussed; examination usually starts with the Middle Ages.⁸ Since however it was the early Church which was foundational not only in terms of Christian theology and doctrine but also in terms of Christian literature and art, it seems important to begin here.

While the modern period may or may not be preoccupied with the eye, and the Reformation with the ear, and while the importance of the ear and the notion of the verbal is undoubtedly supreme in Hebraic theology, in early Christian thought such a separation of the verbal from the visual does not seem to have been the case. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that in this period of Christian history there was a mutuality and interdependence between these senses and the metaphysical structures raised on them.

I wish to argue therefore that in this period at least, it is a mistake to see such a ruthless elevation of either the one sense or the other,

6. J. ELLUL, *The Humiliation of the Word*, tr. J. Main Hanks, Grand Rapids, 1985.

7. M. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 589.

8. Ellul focuses on the fourteenth century, see *The Humiliation*, p. 186 f.

the ear or the eye. It is also a mistake to discuss these senses and their theological effects without reference to the notion of the image. Thus I have located this discussion against the background of the question of the image in the early Church.

It is not possible here to do more than open the question of the image, the ear and the eye in early Christianity, and I should like simply to begin to do so by gathering together some ideas and materials which can be extended in a future discussion, and to put together some of the texts and art of the Church in order to correct any one dimensional assessment of the period. It is important to begin with some considerations of the concept of the image.

II. The early church

II. 1. The notion of the image

There are several fundamental reasons why early Christianity does not make a categorical distinction between the verbal and the visual. The first is that the perspectives of the issue in this thinking are different from those of later ages. So before any detailed examination of the idea of the image and the senses can be pursued, it is important to notice several questions of wider perspective. There is first of all the focus of the question in ancient theology.

With regard to the realm of the phenomenal and the sensory we see that the early Church focused more on the idea of the physical and the material as a whole, rather than on a distinction of one or other sense. Ancient Christians were intensely interested in the physical universe, far more than is often noted. To many it "appeared interesting, enjoyable and important."⁹ In his *Hexaemeron*, a long consideration of the Genesis account of the six days of creation, Basil discussed with his congregation what it means to be a human being in a created physical world; and his enquiry was extended by Gregory of Nyssa into a discourse on what it means to be created and human as such. In a very interesting and overlooked study Nemesius of Emesa was concerned to show the continuity of creation, which he regards as the teaching of Genesis. In this view humanity, which

9. D. S. WALLACE-HADRILL, *The Greek Patristic View of Nature*, Manchester University Press, 1968, preface, p. VII. The book was written to correct a negative impression.

is created last, sums up all that has gone before.¹⁰ These concerns are the primary context for the discussion of the image question. Any narrowing down or change in definition of the question, if this is really the case, appears to be a later development, as is the state of affairs since the Reformation.

With regard to the question of the image, because of the assertion of the book of Genesis that the human being is the image of God,¹¹ it is the body and the soul which are understood to be the more basic and important categories of discussion rather than simply those of the ear and the eye. In the early texts we are never offered a theory of the image as such. In Gregory of Nyssa the classical theory of the image — as a representation of an archetype—is simply assumed. For the Fathers the problem is to construct a theory of the human being as an image, the image of God. Because analysis was concerned to show how this could be so, in early Christian thinking the concept of the image is nearly always functional. Early Christian thinking is interested in how the image works, since its purpose in this context is to explain us. It is for this reason that throughout the *Formation of the Human Being* constant reference is made to the artist and his creation. Underlying the theology there is a controlling analogy: the artist is used as the model for God. The work of making human beings is explained through reference to the artistic process.¹² This Maker is then very different from the Demiurge and the use of the analogy is legitimated by not by Plato but by the Bible.

As being the work of God this particular image is therefore highly visible and artistically outstanding. Indeed it is second to none of the seven wonders of the ancient world, because “no other existing thing, except the human creation, has been made like to God”.¹³ In early Christian thinking therefore the issue is not so much a question

10. See BASIL, *Homélie sur l'Hexaemeron*, SC. 26, bis Paris, 1968. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *De Hominis Opificio*, PG 44. NEMESIUS OF EMESA, *A Treatise on the Nature of Man*, ed. and tr. W. Telfer (Library of Christian Classics IV), London, 1965 (the text is an English edition and translation from the manuscripts).

11. Genesis 1. 26. In expounding the text Gregory quotes the LXX, but appears to base his explanations on the versions. See J. T. MUCKLE, “The Doctrine of St. Gregory of Nyssa on Man as the Image of God”, *Mediaeval Studies*, 7 (1945), p. 55-84, at p. 56.

12. See e. g. *Hom. Op.* 4 PG 44, 136; 5 PG 44, 137 and *passim*.

13. *Hom. Op.* preface.

of the individual senses in their own right, as in their relationship to the whole human being; and of the relationship of the human being to God and the world. This is summed up in Augustine's remark in the *Soliloquies* (1, 2, 7) that the two great subjects of human thought are God and human beings.

That both the ear and the eye, and the verbal and visual discourses are necessary to understand the notions of image and representation in the early Church, follows from this; and it is implied, as we have just seen, in one of the fundamental principles of ancient theology, drawn from the book of Genesis, that it is human beings who are the image and likeness of God, because they are made in his image. God, being invisible, is known through his word, but he is also incarnate, and therefore visible, in Christ, who is also truly human. In contexts such as these, reflection on the nature of the image will indeed always have a transcendental and metaphysical dimension, but this is not due to a simple preference for Greek views of ocularity. It is an attempt also to appropriate the Hebraic tradition.

In addition to the focus of early theology, its history and nature have also influenced the issue. The two cultures, Hebrew and Greek, reached early Christianity already integrated in the Greek Bible. Thus theology in the early Church is a network of interlocking concepts based on biblical revelation and expounded in terms of Greek philosophy, in which a certain concept of the image is one of the most central. The resulting system is very self-consistent. This system was intended however to be the basis not only of exegesis and thought, but also of piety, religion and culture. It was a matter not only of the transcendental image but also of the immanent image.

We should emphasise here the breadth of Greek cultural influence on early Christianity, and on the idea of the image; for though Christianity was a learned religion, in possession of Scriptures, Christian sensibility was formed through the ideals of Graeco-Roman culture described by the term *paideia*.¹⁴ The construction of a biblical Christian sensibility was achieved without the neutralization of existing cultural values, and it was offered through the popular idiom of the late-antique milieu. The formalised training in rhetoric, the verbal idiom of expression which was not in itself *paideia*, although it constituted part of it, had visible effects in the concern for self-

14. See W. JAEGER, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*, Oxford University Press, 1961.

mastery and the projection of a correct and agreeable personal image, which preoccupied late antiquity.¹⁵

Thus word and image, verbal and visual were already linked in the classical idea of *paideia*. Where Christian *paideia* went beyond the cultural concept was that its point was not simply the morally correct or the deportmentally and socially honourable. Through its roots in the Bible it formed also the entry into the transcendental life of the soul with God; it became a word and image of salvation.

Thus it produced an expanded notion of the behavioural function of the image by its connection with the compositional and transcendent functions. Where this is seen most clearly in Christian contexts is in the matter of liturgy, prayer and spirituality. The context of worship brings together the transcendental and immanent aspects, and brings into play also the notion of the person as a compound of body and soul. In fact much of the discussion concerning the nature of the image, and the physical senses of hearing and sight takes place, as we shall see, within the theological analysis of prayer and the life of the soul.

Finally we can see one other fundamental reason why early Christianity wanted and succeeded in having it both ways with regard to God and the image, that is through both the ears and the eyes. It is because a distinction is made in ancient thinking between knowledge and faith; knowledge understood as being essentially intellectual and a matter of spiritual seeing, and faith as being essentially a matter of hearing. Knowledge is conceived of in terms of the archetype of sight, which is universal in Greek thought. The word, through which faith comes is heard. And both these notions are necessary to the ancient concept of the image.

This is a different conception from that of the Reformation, with its emphasis on the primary meaning of faith as the existential surrender to God, based on the biblical word. Faith here is a relational concept, almost a concept of trust, and to that extent it does not need a concept of the image. The Reform was therefore presumably more interested in the emphasising the sense of hearing as archetypal because of its interest in this particular relational interpretation of faith *ex auditu*.

15. See P. BROWN, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*, London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, p. 48 f. Brown regards the emphasis on deportment and decorum as a reaction against the violence of the age.

For the early Church these concepts of knowledge, faith and image depended on certain ideas of perception and ancient notions of the nature of cognition. This brings us more immediately to the question of the senses ; but what is difficult for us to grasp is the different scientific background to these views, and the psychology and physiology on which such views depend.

II. 2. The image, the senses and cognition

The image played a crucial role in a theory of cognition which was intended to answer the fundamental problem of the ineffability of God, a basic principle in both the Jewish and the Greek philosophical traditions. God is what cannot be communicated or expressed in words, and who is beyond the realm of feelings and concepts. This idea was expounded by John Chrysostom in his sermons of the incomprehensibility of God;¹⁶ and Gregory of Nyssa struggled throughout his works with the difficulty of reconciling the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of God's self-revelation with the philosophical account of the divine transcendence and the incomprehensibility of the divine nature to human beings.

The answer lay first in the Logos, the Word, the consubstantial image of God, the Word who had been made flesh in Christ, a word which could be seen as well as heard. In trinitarian and christological contexts the nature of the image became quite precisely defined, but in discussions of Christian anthropology it remained however a more flexible concept. What relates the two contexts together was the fact that the image came to mean primarily the basic means of communication, whose aspects could be verbal or visual and in either case could be represented. It could translate verbally or visually the biblical truth. Even that most spiritual of all the qualities of human existence, the soul, the image of God, was not beyond pictorial representation as we shall see.

Thus a concern for the biblical teaching on the image resulted in a preoccupation with the body and an interest in its structures, senses and functions which became one of the greatest points of indepen-

16. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Sur l'incompréhensibilité de Dieu I, (Homélie I-V)*, SC. 28 bis, Paris, 1970. The sermons, twelve in number, were directed against the Anomoeans, extreme Arians, who believed that we can know God as he knows himself. The first five homilies argue against this theory and demonstrate that only the Son and the Spirit know the Father. For the image theme and its connection see *Hom. IX and XI PG 48*.

dence from the Platonic tradition in the Fathers, which in almost every other way influenced them greatly. Emphasis was placed on the wholeness of the human person who consisted, in Christian thinking, of a human body and soul. The whole person was more than the spiritual element emphasised particularly in Neo-platonic teaching like that of Plotinus.¹⁷ For the Fathers the interior life of the spirit was so inseparable from the material life of the body that Augustine could hold the view that in the Resurrection (of the body) we would have access to each other's thinking; and he emphasises often the idea of the direct contemplative vision of God. Indeed there seems to have been a dispute in Africa at the time as to whether in the resurrection we shall see God with our bodily eyes. And the Manichaeans of course believed that God himself was in some way corporeal.¹⁸

The ears and the eyes were the organs of cognition according to ancient theory, and the connection of both with the Logos was a pre-Christian idea. Both senses had been linked in pre-Socratic thought by Heracleitus. The difference however from the later Christian conception was that it was a scientific matter; it was not viewed as part of the apprehension of a mystical process. Nevertheless the ideas of the early Church are expressed against the background of ancient notions concerning sense perception both auditory and visual.

These ideas are found in the New Testament itself. Matt. 6, 22 links the eye as the organ of vision to the image of the lamp of the body in a passage in which the physiological and the moral are connected.¹⁹ The eye and the capacity to see both physically and morally depends on the light within the human being. The comparison of the eye to the lamp occurs first in Empedocles, who saw the physiology

17. For Plotinus see E. K. EMILSSON, *Plotinus on Sense-Perception*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

18. *De civ.* 22, 29, *De civ.* 24, 3, 5; cf. *Ep.* 92, *Ep.* 147, *Ep.* 148, *Ep.* 162, *Ep.* 130, 14, 27; *En. Ps.* 26, 2, 9; *En. Ps.* 43, 5; *Sermo* 277, 13-19, *Sermo* 362, 29, 30-31. The anthropomorphism of God was a problem. For differing interpretations see D. L. PAULSEN, "Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses", *Harvard Theological Review*, 83 (1990), p. 105-16, and K. PAFFENROTH, "Paulsen on Augustine: an Incorporeal or Non-Anthropomorphic God?", *Harvard Theological Review*, 86, 2, (1993), p. 233-39.

19. For a study of the passage see H. D. BETZ, "Matthew VI, 22 f. and ancient Greek theories of vision", in *Text and Interpretation*, ed. E. Best and R. McL. Wilson, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

of the eye as a kind of lantern which contained a fire lying behind the pupil. While all later theories of sense perception and cognition were laid on the foundation of pre-Socratic analysis, it was Plato's observations and concepts of physical vision and light, interior and exterior, which affected all subsequent thinking. This is particularly true in the case of his understanding of how the soul perceives truth.²⁰ In the early Church the metaphor of seeing is often used for understanding.

The structure of the body interested the Greek Fathers in particular, and they seem to have derived most of their ideas concerning the senses from Aristotle and Galen. They tend to discuss the senses in the context of cosmology and of the human creation, and they share common theories of the ear and the eye which they disclose in random remarks, although a more lengthy treatment of the senses is given by in his treatise by Nemesius.²¹

For the Fathers the senses are matters of great significance, from two points of view. They enable pleasure in the first instance. But above all they form the link between the body and soul. Basil explains the connection in his account of sensation. Sensation leads first to the formation of the image, then of the concept and finally of the word.²² Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa and Theodoret stress the part played by the mind in hearing. In the *Stromateis* for example Clement states that it is through our understanding that we distinguish the important from the unimportant among the sounds which have entered the head through the physical channels of the ear.²³

The word sight is used in two senses, according to Nemesius, for the physical mechanism and for the faculty of perception, and he discusses at length several theories of vision. Basil's theory is that light permits vision to pass from the eye to the object of regard. Both consider vision as fallible; Basil, because owing to the phenomenon of distance, we do not see things as they really are, and Nemesius because sight, in addition to the mental faculties, needs the other senses to support it. In particular it needs memory. He quotes the example

20. See *Republic* VI, VII, and *Timaeus*.

21. Nemesius not only made use of Galen but extended and corrected him. See Telfer, p. 211 f.

22. *Hex.* 3, 57. For this reference and what follows, and much more material see the discussion of Wallace-Hadrill in his second chapter, "The structure and functions of the human body".

23. *Strom.* 7, 7, 36, GCS, Dritter Band, p. 28.

of seeing an apple, where it is the soul, which retains a memory of the smell and taste, which associates these qualities with the shape and the colour.²⁴

The ear itself is the seat of memory, as we learn from Pliny; and according to Augustine it is also the seat of sensibility.²⁵ Several classical texts speak of touching a person's ear, to attract attention, as matter of proverbial wisdom.²⁶ It is very interesting to note that while the eye alone is never illustrated in early Christian art, there exist representations of the ear alone; and in this context of memory. A gemstone from the collection of the Library in Ravenna (see Fig. 1) shows a hand holding the lobe of an ear between two fingers, and is inscribed with the word *memento*, "remember". It is also found engraved in the stone-work of above a fire-place in the sacristy of S. Vitale in Ravenna.²⁷

Although the context and purpose for much of this analysis of the senses was doctrinal, we must also remember that thinkers such as Basil and Theodoret were bishops. They were greatly concerned for the bodily as well as the spiritual welfare of their flocks. In his letters Theodoret draws attention to his concern for public health, which he promoted by taking responsibility for the public baths and the drainage system of his town. He encouraged doctors to care for the sick. Basil went so far as to acquire medical skill, theoretical and practical, in his own right, partly on account of the ill-health which had dogged him throughout his life, but also to help the sick in the hospital he had founded in Caesarea. Gregory Nazianzen's brother, Caesarius, had studied medicine and gave his services free.²⁸ There is much discussion concerning the possible medical career of Nemesius and how far his interest in writing about the human being is prompted by this. It was Harnack who drew attention to the importance of Christianity and medicine, and made a study of Christians engaged in it.²⁹

24. BASIL, *Hex.*, 2, 7, 45; 6, 9, 140; NEMESIUS, 7, 29.

25. PLINY, *Nat. Hist.*, 11, 251. AUGUSTINE, *Conf.*, 4, 11, 16.

26. VERGIL, *Eclogue*, 6, 3.

27. See E. LE BLANT, "Une collection de pierres gravées à la bibliothèque de Ravenne", *Ecole Française de Rome, Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire*, III^e Année (1883). The photograph is reproduced by kind permission of the authorities of Cambridge University Library.

28. *Orat.* 7, 7.

29. A. HARNACK, "Medizinisches aus der ältesten Kirchengeschichte", *Texte und Untersuchungen*, vol. VIII, 4 (1892), p. 40 f.

Frequently mentioned in the texts, pagan and Christian, is the problem of eye-disease. Ophthalmia appears to have been the one of the commonest forms of illness in antiquity. Gregory of Nyssa, discussing the issue of seeing God as the life of the soul, and whether it is a reward, compares the matter to the case of the eyes and what happens when ophthalmia strikes.³⁰ And the Greek literary papyri attest the recurring problems of eye-disease, with the corresponding preponderant place given to ophthalmology in Egyptian medicine.³¹ It is not surprising then that the evil eye, and everything associated with it was the commonest form of superstition.

What is very striking in view of the evidence which we have examined so far, is the fact that the absence of the categorial distinctions under discussion did not lead in the Greek East in the patristic period to a theory of the image. And in so far as Greek patristic thought was occupied with cognition and communication, it still lacked a general concept of meaning which would relate what was known by one sense to what was known by another, and which could also relate what is spoken to what is written. It was left to contemporary Western thinking to make up the deficiency.

II. 3. Physics, metaphysics and theory

The same co-ordination of physics and metaphysics found in the Greeks occurs in the West also, but in a different way and with different results; so that by the end of the sixth century the Western consideration of the senses ends in a sort of philosophy of language and a philosophy of art. This is due to the work of the two Western giants, Augustine of Hippo and Gregory the Great.

Theories of cognition were applied to the ear and the eye in connection with the reception of the word particularly by Augustine. For him the ear and the eye are mutually reinforcing because one is passive and one is active. The ear cannot prevent itself from hearing any sound which is within its range, since hearing arises from the object which generates the sound. With regard to vision on the other hand the viewer is active. Relying on the ancient theory of extramission—the visual ray account, whereby light emerges from the eye and reaches the object of sight which then imprints itself on the soul of

30. *De Infantibus*, PG 46, 176, 177

31. See M.-H. MARGANNE, *L'Ophthalmologie dans l'Égypte Greco-Romaine d'après les Papyrus Littéraires Grecs*, Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1994.

the viewer—Augustine applies it as an analogy for the interaction of God and the soul in its life of prayer and worship.³²

Miles discusses the pivotal role played by physical vision in Augustine's attempts to understand the relation of the soul to God and of the nature of the Trinity. But it is important to note here that he uses the eyes only as the easiest form of illustration of what he wishes to say. He stresses that the point applies to all the senses. "What one sense reports holds true for the rest."³³ There is a parallel in the *De Magistro*, where Augustine discusses the understanding of words. What will elsewhere be discussed in terms of illumination by divine light is here stated in terms of the "interior teacher" teaching meaning. He brings together the visual and aural models of knowing. Thus light and sound are equally central to his talk about knowing, the former is the paradigm of real knowledge, the latter of belief.

For Augustine understanding and communication through language was a manifestation of the human being's need for transcendence, the need to go beyond ourselves to God and others. Above all he regarded words as signs of this, and in *De Doctrina Christiana* is usually credited with being the earliest thinker to have coordinated a theory of language with a theory of the sign.³⁴ Anything however, according to Augustine, can in fact be a sign; words are special in this respect only in that their very existence is as signs (even though they can sometimes be treated as things). Augustine speaks of many things as signs, and the *imago* is for him a sign of a special kind. However he does not extend this concept, or his general idea of meaning, to the artistic image. Nevertheless the mutuality of the senses and their interdependence perhaps needs to be kept in mind when we consider Augustine with regard to the theme of this paper.

For his analysis could easily be applied to the theory of the visual sign. That Augustine's analysis contains implicitly what is needed for a theory of the artistic image was recognised by Gregory at the end of the sixth century. There seems to be evidence that Gregory

32. See M. MILES, "Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Saint Augustine's *De Trinitate* and *Confessions*", *Journal of Religion*, 63 (1983), p. 125-42.

33. *De Trin.*, 11, 1, 1-2.

34. One of the most helpful treatments of Augustine and signs is that of R. A. MARKUS, "Signs, Communication and Communities in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*" (to appear), which gathers in an appendix a select bibliography on Augustine's theory of the sign. I would like to thank Professor Markus for permitting me to read and draw on his study before publication.

drew on Augustine's theory of signs to elaborate a similar understanding of art.

Chazelle has drawn attention to the influence of Augustine's ideas on Gregory's well-known letters to Serenus of Marseilles concerning idolatry and imagery; and thinks that he coupled these ideas with his own observation of the monumental works in the contemporary Roman churches.³⁵ The letters are concerned with the illiterate who derive their knowledge not from reading texts but from reading the images on church walls. In his *Tractates on the Gospel of St. John* Augustine had argued that the miracles of Christ can be treated as forms of language, and he distinguished between someone who reads a miracle and someone who merely admires the deed. A contrast is thus drawn between one who reads a visual event like a text and one who views it simply as a picture—that is between understanding and aesthetics. According to Chazelle this idea lies behind Gregory's notion of what it is to read an artistic representation, to move from the sign to the thing signified. In other words for Christian art, and the Christian viewer of imagery, it is a matter of active seeking of understanding rather than a disengaged evaluation and enjoyment of aesthetic qualities.

When we add Mariaux's analysis of the same letters, in which he shows that for Gregory the visual sign and the spoken and written word are simply two expressions of the same one reality of truth and both directed to the same end, knowledge of God, it is clear that by the end of our period reading words and reading art are brought together.³⁶ The beginning of a theory of the image, applicable both to the literary and visual artistic form, begins to emerge. We have in Gregory the beginning of a theory of the nature of the Christian image in the West. The significance of his teaching for later mediaeval theories is, as is well-known, immense and influential. The Greek East had to wait for over another century to elaborate its own theory, and it was based on different principles.

However working back from Augustine's and Gregory's fuller development, we can see that this simply represents the raising to the level of articulated theory what was latent all along in the verbal and the visual tradition of the early Church.

35. C. M. CHAZELLE, "Pictures, Books, and the Illiterate: Pope Gregory I's Letters to Serenus of Marseilles", *Word and Image*, 6 (1990), p. 138-53. See p. 146-47.

36. See P.-A. MARIAUX, "L'Image selon Grégoire le Grand et la question de l'art missionnaire", *Cristianesimo nella storia*, 14 (1993), p. 1-12.

II. 4. *The visual tradition*

The idea of the continuity of the physical and spiritual through the medium of the senses and the image is found in the earliest known Christian epigraph — the celebrated epitaph of the bishop Abercius of Hieropolis inscribed between 170 A. D. and 200 A. D. — and the earliest Christian art, that of the Roman Catacombs. In form of a marble sepulchral altar of the same date and funerary context as the catacomb art, the epitaph sums up, like the paintings, the articles of the Christian faith, with the same imagery and with the same ambiguity of expression. One particular image from the epitaph is noteworthy and relevant here, Abercius speaks of the pure Shepherd, whose great eyes are all seeing.³⁷

The same idea of the co-ordination of the physical and the metaphysical, of the continuity of the physical and spiritual is equally illustrated in the catacomb art and on the sarcophagi especially in the much debated orans figures. Although the meaning of these figures is disputed, and they are variously interpreted as pietas, the soul, or joy, this is not immediately important here. The significant facts for our theme are the artistic stress on the eyes, and the representation of the personages as praying.³⁸

The orans figures are images of human beings, frontally presented, with arms outstretched in the well-documented and pre-Christian attitude of prayer. Their eyes either are raised to heaven or staring at the viewer; and they are huge, like those of Abercius' Shepherd, and very dark. The idea of frontality and the largeness of the eyes, which resemble the portraits from the Faiyum in Egypt and examples of Campanian painting from Pompeii, have been analysed many times and in particular by Swift, who stresses the frontality as an extreme development by Christianity of earlier Graeco-Roman art.³⁹ By the fourth century the impact of the figures in the catacomb art comes almost entirely from the eyes (see Fig. 2).

37. For the epitaph see G. RAUSCHEN, *Monumenta minora saeculi secundi*, Bonn, 1914, p. 3-9, p. 37-41 and H. STRATHMANN, T. KLAUSER, "Aberkios", in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, 1 (1950), p. 12-17.

38. The bibliography on the orans is long. See in particular DACL 12, 2298 f.; T. KLAUSER, "Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der christlichen Kunst", *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, 2 (1959), p. 115-31; 3 (1960), p. 112 f. L. de BRUYNE, "Les Lois de l'art paléochrétien comme instrument herméneutique", *Rivista di archeologia cristiana*, 39 (1963), p. 12 f.

39. The Faiyum portraits are conventionally so called; they come from several Egyptian cemeteries. See A. F. SHORE, *Portrait Painting from Roman*

The gesture of prayer as the context for the ocular emphasis is very important for our study for two reasons. Firstly it emphasises the way in which there is no rivalry here between the senses. What is in play is the dialogic character of prayer; it is the idea of hearing and speaking to God, which also takes place within the context of the community of the Church and its preaching. Secondly it shows that in prayer we can have a foretaste of what it is like to see God. It is a matter of seeing the invisible.

The earliest of these images predate Augustine's reflections by over a century, and we do not have any unambiguous testimony from the early Church concerning them. But some of their ideas appear to be similar to an utterance of Eusebius of Caesarea (c265 — c339-40). He links notions of the soul and the eye and prayer, in reference to Christian portraiture, in the form of the portrait of Constantine. In the *Vita* he writes :

How deeply his soul was impressed by the power of divine faith may be understood from the fact that he ordered his portrait to be stamped on the gold coinage of the Empire with the eyes uplifted as in the posture of prayer to God; and this money became current throughout the Roman world. His full length portrait was also placed over the entrance-gate at the palaces in some cities, eyes up-raised and hands outspread, as if in prayer.⁴⁰

One thinks also of the gigantic head with the large eyes from the Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome, which Drake speaks of as tending "to eradicate the other heavy features, relentlessly demanding the viewer's attention... they are fixed upward, away from the cares of this world, in an eternal gaze on the heavens."⁴¹ (See Fig. 3.)

Eusebius emphasises the physical sense of the eyes as expressing the immaterial soul and its immaterial traits within the context of prayer. Thus the idea and imagery of the imperial portrait seems to have been enhanced and further developed under the influence of

Egypt, Trustees of the British Museum, 1972. E. H. SWIFT, *Roman Sources of Christian Art*, New York, 1951, p. 160-61. The only deviation from complete frontality in some of the paintings is in the side-ways and upward direction of the eyes: p. 161.

40. *Vita Constantini* 4, 15. For this and the translation see M. MILES, *Image as Insight*, Boston, 1985, p. 170, n. 74.

41. H. A. DRAKE, *In Praise of Constantine: A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975, p. 3.

Christian ideas. Prayer is of course part of all religion and it was a preoccupation from the beginning with Christianity. A literature on it developed in the third century, at the time of the formation of the earliest of this imagery. It would be very useful to investigate this connection with the Christian idea of the image, together with that of preaching, in order to have a fully rounded understanding of the nature of the image in the early centuries.

III. Conclusion

To return to the point from which this discussion began, the rivalry of the senses and the supposed division of the ear from the eye, I should like to conclude with the words of Gregory of Nyssa from his sermon on the martyr, Theodore. He is speaking with regard to the cult of relics and of the cross, which was in full swing in the fourth century. Although the cult of the image and the cult of the relic are not the same — although a good deal of commentary gives the impression that they are — his words do have a general significance for the image. He offers a most suggestive formulation and interrelation of all the senses, linking them all with the ideas which we have been examining. He shows too that it was neither the word nor the visual image that made a thing normative for the early Church. Images and the very idea of the image had arisen on a basis; the basis of what was believed implicitly from experience as well as what was taught and officially confessed.

Those who look at them [i.e. relics] embrace, so to speak, the living, flowering body. Bringing together all the instruments of their senses, eyes, mouth, and ear, and shedding abundant tears of reverence and emotion, they offer the martyr their prayers of intercession, as though he were alive and present.⁴²

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42. PG. 46, 740. I would like to thank Professor J. Hewood Thomas and Professor R. A. Markus for reading an earlier draft of this paper and for discussing it with me.

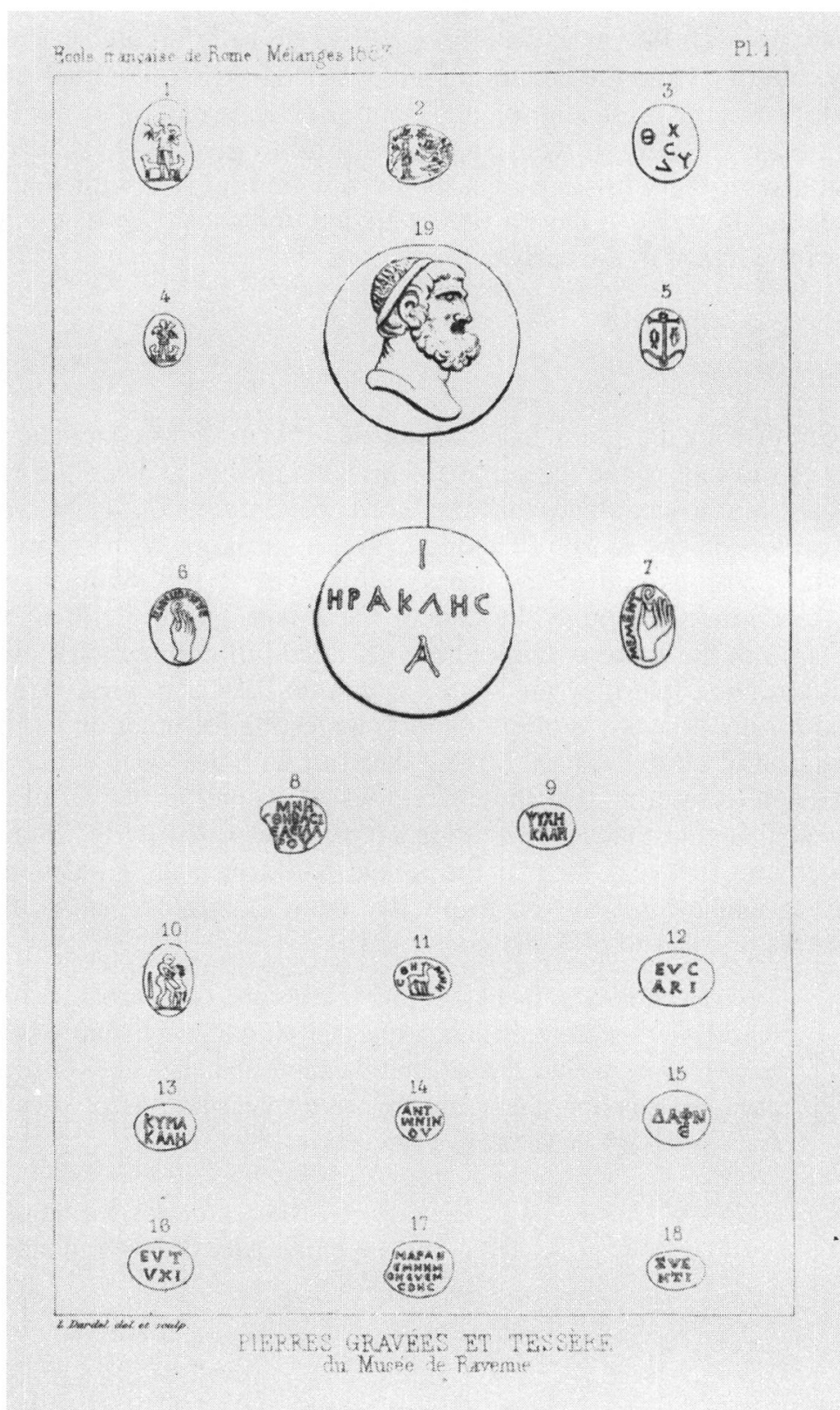


Figure 1. «Pierres gravées et tessère du Musée de Ravenne» (Edmond Le Blant, «Une collection de pierres...», *Ecole Française de Rome*, Paris 1883, plate I. Photo: Cambridge University Library)



Figure 2. Orans, IVth cent. (Rome, Via Latina Catacomb)



Figure 3. Head of Constantine the Great, IVth cent. (Rome, Musei Capitolini)