

## Idolatry beyond the Second Commandment: Conflicting Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen<sup>1</sup>

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The production and use of images in the Abrahamic traditions is usually debated against a backdrop of aniconism and the interdiction of representational images of the divine as the normative default. Although these monotheistic traditions grapple with the legitimacy of images in manifold ways, it is problematic to take this as the backdrop for scholarly research. Focusing on figurations and sensations of the unseen, this volume aims to broaden the scope of scholarly inquiry towards a wider set of practices through which humans mediate the unseen. While many contributions explore negotiations of the making, value, use and legitimacy of images *within* Judaism, Christianity or Islam, this chapter calls attention to the *margins* of Christianity, where ‘idolatry’ charges arise with regard to the cult objects and images in indigenous religious traditions. Charges of idolatry, of course, do not necessarily indicate a clash between aniconism and the worship of things framed as ‘idols’. Rather, such charges involve conflicting ways to figure and sense the unseen. Throughout the history of Christianity, non-Christian cult objects have been – and still are – dismissed and renamed as idols, and their worship as false. Across the world, Catholic and Protestant missionaries legitimized the iconoclastic acts with regard to indigenous religious traditions by referring to the biblical interdiction to make and worship idols (most prominent being Exod. 20.4-6; Deut. 5.8-10).

As a compound of the classical Greek terms *eidōlon* (image, in the sense of phantom) and *latreia* (worship), the term idolatry refers to the worship of idols. The scandal to which the dismissive term idolatry refers is the worship of a god or gods, whereas God is the one and only to be worshipped – and not through an image. The question whether and how images can play a role in the Christian tradition has been hotly debated and has yielded a distinction between idolatry and iconoduly. As a compound of *eikōn* (image, in the sense of a figure or portrait) and *douleia* (service), it signifies the veneration of images. Of course, the qualification of an image as icon or idol depends on the perspective of beholders, and their visual regimes. Idolatry became a resilient generic term to acknowledge and dismiss indigenous worship practices, reframing them in the context of a conventional

exegesis of the Old Testament, according to which the God of Israel furiously called for the destruction of the gods of neighbouring peoples and punished his people for making idols such as the golden calf (Sherwood 2014). Rejections of such things as idols are inextricably linked with biblical interdictions to make and use images – often referred to in the shorthand of the Second Commandment. However, as I will argue in this chapter, it would be reductive to take this commandment as a frame for analysing the clashing figurations of the unseen that are covered – and even covered up – by the term idolatry.

Through my research on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Protestant missionaries of the *Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft* (NMG) among the Ewe in today's Ghana and Togo, I found that the missionaries associated non-Christian practices of worship with idolatry, fetishism and the devil, the master of deception and sensuality. Taken up by African converts, the repercussions of this iconoclastic preaching are still felt today in Southern Ghana, where human-made sculptures, masks and objects used in religious devotion, and the spectre of idolatry and fetishism hovering around them, are still rigorously and zealously debated. Pentecostals, in particular, dismiss such material forms as idols and even contest their value as cultural heritage. As the focus of my historical and ethnographic research over the past twenty-five years, this frontier area of European imperial outreach offered me a critical vantage point to rethink key concepts and approaches in the study of religion from a material angle. Gradually I recognized – also in my own work – a Protestant-Calvinist inclination to privilege 'inner' mental processes of meaning making, while the 'outward' forms (images and objects included) and practices through which meaning was established and performed were secondary.<sup>2</sup> Here I do not aim to give a detailed historical analysis of actual encounters between missionaries and indigenous populations around charges of idolatry and the destruction of so-called idols in Southern Ghana (for this see Meyer 1999, 2010). Instead I take this setting as a suitable horizon for reappraising the role of images – and cult objects in general – and the complexities regarding the figuration and sensation of the unseen in the study of religion and culture from a position 'beyond the Second Commandment'.

Scholars studying religion limit their analytical options if they take biblical passages conveying interdictions with regard to the making of images at face value, as if these references would prove the aniconic nature of Christianity – and for that matter Judaism – as a norm and explain, or even legitimize, its stance against idolatry. Although religious studies scholars tend to emphasize their distance from Christian theology, arguably the study of religion has long been indebted to a post-Enlightenment Protestant legacy, which shows in the tendency to privilege text and word above images and other religious media (see also Uehlinger in this volume; Asad 1993). Even historically and theologically, the normativity of aniconism in Christianity is questionable. Yet the legacy of Calvinism, which fully realizes and mandates this assumption, has infused much of the modern, secular study of religion. This limits conceptual approaches in analysing the modes of imagining and imaging the unseen. A full conceptual appraisal of images and figurations of the unseen and of the relation between religion and art in the framework of religious studies is still to be developed (e.g. Mohn 2013),<sup>3</sup> and this volume is part of that endeavour.

The need to reappraise images from a position beyond the normativity of the Second Commandment emerges against the lingering legacy of this Calvinist attitude towards images. This attitude became engrained not only with text-centred scholarly presuppositions in the study of religion, but also with mainstream understandings of modern society as shaped through the disenchantment of the world and the iconoclastic attitude towards cult images famously attributed to Calvinist reformers by Max Weber. The historiography of this legacy engaged in this chapter enables movement beyond its restrictions. An alternative conceptual approach to religion and images acknowledges the constitutive, world-making role of pictorial media and the visual regimes in which they operate, shaping lived experience in the midst of competing and contested processes of figuration and the triggering of sensations. The rejection of (certain) images on the part of believers and theologians indicates a particular *visual regime* – that is, embodied, habitual practices of looking, displaying and figuring. Visual regimes involve specific, restrictive attitudes and practices towards the use and value of images. Restrictions on the use of images in representing the divine – and the demonic – can best be analysed in the context of clashes and contestations over different, co-existing figurations and sensations of the unseen in historically situated power constellations. Doing so requires a broad framework distinguishing the stances of various religious visual regimes to images, ranging from outright interdiction (*Bilderverbot*), to disinterest, to their positive appreciation as harbingers of divinity (see also Jakiša and Trembl 2007: 42). Also, it has to be taken into account that restrictions with regard to physical images are not necessarily extended to inner, mental images in believers' imagination.

This chapter has three parts. Seeking to move towards a standpoint 'beyond the Second Commandment', in the first part I critique Bruno Latour's emphasis on the Calvinist interpretation of this commandment, echoed in the work of W. J. T. Mitchell. Latour's neglect of alternative visual regimes narrows modernity to a field continuously trespassing the Second Commandment which triggers acts of iconoclasm. If his work is helpful to grasp the energy invested in the destruction of images, art history engages the constructive negotiation of images for religious purposes. The second part turns to the German strand of art history known as *Bildwissenschaft*, which, I argue, offers stimulating insights into alternative takes on images and the theologies and contested desires in which they are embedded. These insights are also helpful to develop an understanding of how religion generates a sense of presence through images and, by implication, other material forms. Taking these Europe-grounded approaches as a point of departure for the study of an export of the notion of idolatry by NMG missionaries to West Africa, the third part addresses clashing figurations of the unseen. It shows how the indigenous deities recast as Christian idols and dismissed as demonic continuously require to be pictured.

## Latour and the Second Commandment

Different Christian traditions number the Decalogue differently. Some do not even recognize the Second Commandment as a separate commandment (see Sherwood in

this volume).<sup>4</sup> Far from incidental, the enshrinement of the interdiction against carved images as a separate commandment laid the groundwork for anti-Catholic fervour and extensive iconoclastic destruction in sixteenth-century Germany, Switzerland, England and the Netherlands. Insisting on a sharp division between matter and spirit, iconoclasts regarded paintings and sculptures (or carved images) as unsuited to represent and convey a sense of the divine (van Asselt 2007). At stake are complicated theological questions concerning the representability and, by implication, accessibility of the divine; the status and value of matter and of the gendered body as suitable harbingers of divine presence; and the role of humans in this process (see Brunotte 2013). As pointed out by David Morgan, a major disagreement between Protestants and Catholics concerned divergent understandings of ‘the shape of the holy’ and the related authorized manners in accessing the power of the sacred (Morgan 2015: 16–23).

The predominance of aniconism in Christian Old Testament theology has been challenged and deconstructed since the 1970s, when the rise of iconographic approaches to the Hebrew Bible literature went hand in hand with a rehabilitation of religious history as a study field. This was an important move in disentangling normative theological claims about the meaning of the Second Commandment from actual practices with regard to carved images in ancient Hebrew culture (see Uehlinger in this volume). As Stordalen argues in his contribution, the idea of a necessary aniconism may even prove to be a projection of modernist, logocentric readings of the Old Testament sources back onto biblical Hebrew theology, rather than a genuine reflection thereof (see also Sherwood in this volume). Similarly, scholars of Christian visual culture have refuted stereotypical ideas of Protestantism – even its strictest versions – as aniconic, pointing out that Reformed Christianity assigned a role to and reformed images (e.g. Koerner 2004; Morgan 1998, 2015; Promey 2011). Nonetheless, these normative claims have a life of their own and were periodically actualized in the context of clashes around the legitimacy of visual, material means in re-presenting God. And they are still lingering on, most blatantly in current Pentecostal theologies that fiercely dismiss idolatry, which is held to thrive in Catholicism and indigenous cults alike (also in Ghana where Pentecostalism is highly prominent).

Intriguingly, the Second Commandment is also a favoured point of reference for scholars outside of theology and Christianity who are interested in the complexities of human–image relations in modern societies, such as Bruno Latour. Latour made me think about human–image and human–object relations in new ways, freed from fixed and purifying asymmetries that distinguish modern Westerners from their primitive Others (Meyer 2012: 21–3). I agree with him that contemporary modern society is inflected with stances and attitudes towards images from the religious past, including aniconism and iconoclastic attitudes. And I value his introduction of the notion ‘iconoclash’ to designate a stance on the part of idol smashers to affirm the existence and power of idols in the act of destruction.

Yet his invocation of the Second Commandment comes with its own problems. In his influential introduction to the *Iconoclash* volume and exhibition at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medien (ZKM) in Karlsruhe (2002), Latour sketches a scenario in which reality and fabrication are fundamentally opposed. Obviously, it is directly indebted to biblical prophetic parodies on how idols are produced and therefore cannot be gods.

At stake is the 'digging for the origin of an absolute – not a relative – distinction between a pure world, absolutely emptied of human-made intermediaries and a disgusting world composed of impure but fascinating human-made mediators' (2002: 14). This problematic, modern distinction, he claims, cuts across the spheres of religion, art and science. In this crazy scenario, images feature as the return of the repressed; against all iconoclastic impulses they appear to be unavoidable and necessary – epitomes of contested desires that are prone to be made and destroyed over and over again. Behind the human struggle against – as well as with – images stands a larger project to grasp an objective reality presumably untainted by human mediations. Latour wants to solve the deadlock produced by the modern opposition between the real and the fabricated in science, art and religion with a plea to acknowledge mediation, and hence the capacity of the human hand to make reality, to create a world, to fabricate the divine. Though I very much agree with this larger point (and endorse an understanding of religion as a practice of mediation, Meyer 2012, see below), I nonetheless find problematic the overall scenario sketched by him, which revolves around the Second Commandment. He asks:

Are we sure we have understood it correctly? Have we not made a long and terrifying mistake about its meaning? How can we reconcile this request for a totally aniconic society, religion and science with the fabulous proliferation of images that characterizes our media-filled cultures? (2002: 18)

Obviously, this 'we' *includes* those who maintain a rigid position associated with the Reformed tradition that counts the commandment as the second (in itself an index of a modern interpretation). It *excludes* those who have long acknowledged the impossibility of obeying the commandment in full or insisted on alternative interpretations; who developed sophisticated theologies of images as mediating the divine through which it becomes possible to maintain icons and still reject idolatry (in the Orthodox traditions, see Luehrmann and Kreinath in this volume); or who at least condoned the use of images for didactic or celebratory purposes (as, for instance, the Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions). His statement that art historians and theologians 'know' that 'many sacred icons that have been celebrated and worshipped are called *acheiropoieta*; that is *not* made by any human hand' is correct. However, it reduces the spectrum of possibilities in making the divine present to the case of the *acheiropoieta*, which is one among others. As the next section will show, art historians *also know* that painters negotiate the possibility to represent the divine via paintings. Latour's claim that for 'religion in general' the idea 'to *add the hand* to the pictures is tantamount to spoiling them, criticizing them' (2002: 16, italics in original) cannot be maintained. Outside of the Reformed tradition, there is abundant evidence of sophisticated theologies of the image – and mediation in a broader sense – that develop models for how to think and sense divine presence through certain figural forms, whether they proclaim a likeness with the divine or only allude to it indirectly (see below). Tremendous energy went into keeping open the possibility to make and use images, notwithstanding strict interpretations of the Second Commandment and the spectre of idolatry. A more inclusive 'we' would have brought all these co-existing

traditions of mediating the divine – including Catholic, Orthodox and Lutheran traditions – into the picture, showing that iconoclastic and iconodule stances and acts have always coexisted, even in modernity.

An interpretation of the commandment as ‘a request for a totally aniconic society’ – which Latour presumes as the dominant meaning – is only one possible interpretation. Of course, certain religious protagonists legitimize(d) their iconoclastic acts through iconophobic interpretations (though rarely advocating full aniconicity), as did foundational Enlightenment philosophers following Kant who regarded the *Bilderverbot* as the ultimate sublime passage in the Torah (see also Bukdahl in this volume).<sup>5</sup> Yet Latour reaffirms this position as universal. Asking whether ‘we’ understood it correctly or not, he echoes stereotypical views of the role of images and objects in Christianity and Judaism that ignore the nuanced analysis as developed in biblical scholarship since the 1970s, let alone acknowledge the complex aesthetic practices with regard to images in the context of which the Second Commandment arose (see the chapters by Uehlinger, Stordalen, Sherwood in this volume). The commandment has all too often been invoked by scholars to support ‘the myth of aniconism’, which should, however, not be taken at face value with regard to the Abrahamic traditions (Freedberg 1989: 54–81) but rather be deconstructed.

In Latour’s plot, according to which the Second Commandment calls for an aniconism that is impossible to be maintained, humans face a maddening double bind:

Human hands cannot stop toiling, producing images, pictures, inscriptions of all sorts, to still generate, welcome, or collect objectivity, beauty, and divinities, exactly as in the – now forbidden – repressed, obliterated old days. How could one not become a fanatic since gods, truths and sanctity have to be made and there is no longer any legitimate way of making them? (2002: 22)

Here he alludes to a happy past – prior to the Reformation and the rise of modernity, or even a past before the rise of monotheist Judaism – preceding the interdiction of image production. But in the aftermath of Mosaic law, the instigation of the Second Commandment has triggered a fanatic attitude which yields an iconoclasm, understood by Latour as an aggressive energy with regard to images, unleashing ‘an action for which there is no way to know, without further inquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive’ (2002: 14). And so, in his reading,

the second commandment is all the more terrifying since there is no way to obey it. The only thing you can do to pretend you observe it is to *deny* the work of your own hands, to *repress* the action ever present in the making, fabrication, construction, and production of images, to *erase* the writing at the same time you are writing it, to *slap* your hands at the same time they are manufacturing. And with no hand, what will you do? With no image, to what truth will you have access? With no instrument, what science will instruct you? (2002: 23, italics in the original)

Latour, in venturing an interpretation that is cruder than the strictest Reformed theology, overlooks the complex debates and theologies about the relations between

humans, God and images in the various Christian traditions that developed alternative interpretations of biblical passages about image restrictions. Seeking to critique mainstream understandings of the modern, Latour vests his interpretation of the commandment with an exaggerated authority that reaches even beyond the sphere of (Reformed) Christianity. His idea that the Second Commandment would prohibit any human fabrication – not just images in the common sense<sup>6</sup> – in the framework of religion and in society in general is misguided. Paradoxically, this idea affirms the modern drive towards purification that Latour relentlessly wished to critique. A less rhetorically charged position would immediately open up alternative interpretations and possibilities in the Christian archive, as ‘we have never been’ under the sway of the Second Commandment in the strict sense just as ‘we have never been modern’.

A similar critique can be made with regard to W. J. T. Mitchell, who refers to the Second Commandment throughout his book *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005). He regards it as

not some minor prohibition. It is the absolutely foundational commandment; the one that marks the boundary between the faithful and the pagans, the chosen people and the gentiles. Its violation (which seems all but inevitable) is the occasion for terrible punishment, as the episode of the golden calf suggests. (2005: 246)

Over and over he stresses the authoritativeness of the interdiction to ‘make an image of anything’ (2005: 133). Like Latour, he states that this commandment ‘has never been well understood, and certainly never obeyed literally’. And yet he claims that the Abrahamic God takes it more seriously than all the other commandments, even as more important than the interdiction to kill (2005: 133). While he grants that it is ‘an impossible commandment’ that has never been, and can never be, followed ‘literally’, he is struck by the fact that there are commentators (he refers to our contributor, the late Kalman Bland, explicitly) who, in arguing against claims of a presumed aniconicity of the Abrahamic traditions, chose to ‘ignore the literal meaning completely’ (2005: n23). To me, it is quite puzzling that Mitchell insists so strongly on a ‘literal’ (as he understands it) reading of Exod. 20.4 in order to underpin his plea for humans to move against it and reclaim from God their capacity to make pictures. As argued by Sherwood (in this volume), Mitchell’s is in fact a typically modern reading that founds modernity and secularity in the human rebellion against the interdiction to make images. So while Latour sees modernity as caught up in a double bind of image making and image rejection, for Mitchell modernity offers the possibility to be liberated from the sway of the Second Commandment. Notwithstanding these differences, both share a rather narrow, ultra-Calvinist reading of this commandment that staggers their critical project.

If we agree that ‘we have never been modern’, it is time to fully take into account that the break assumed between modernity and the medieval world is not as rigorous as assumed, just as the difference between modern Europe and the non-Western world cannot be mapped on a narrative of Western superiority that legitimated imperialism. In order to develop more subtle approaches for the study of the role of images with regard to the unseen, sustained interdisciplinary inquiries are necessary. Trained in anthropology and religious studies, I find it productive to engage with

critical scholarship in Old Testament theology and art history. Taking into account the expertise of the former in the context of this book project triggered my critical reading of Latour and Mitchell. In the next part, I focus on debates about the use of images and theologies of mediation in the Christian tradition as they have been traced, in particular, in the German strand of art history called *Bildwissenschaft*. Doing so unpacks multiple genealogies of modernity and attitudes to images outside the Calvinist legacy. It thus opens the full archive of the Christian traditions and their multiple attitudes to images.

## Images as media of the unseen

Gottfried Boehm, one of the architects of *Bildwissenschaft*, states explicitly that he does not explore the interdiction of making carved images in the narrative of the golden calf with the aim to trace the *origin* of image wars from the Byzantine struggles to the Reformation and modern political forms of iconoclasm (1994: 329, see also 1997). Like Latour and Mitchell, he proposes a modern reading of this interdiction. But rather than taking it as the Mosaic origin calling for a radical aniconism that still echoes in modern societies, Boehm investigates it as a resource to gain philosophical insights into the nature of images and their power. Situating the narrative of the golden calf in relation to the idea of God-likeness of humans (Gen. 1.26-7), according to which the latter are an image of God, he argues that the main point of the Second Commandment is that the analogy between humans and God is not reciprocal: humans are images of God, the first image maker and artist, but they should not depict Him in a visual form. From whence does this interdiction emanate? Boehm argues that it is due to the capacity of the image 'to render present an impalpable and distant being, to vest it with a presence that is able to fill the sphere of human attention entirely. The image owes its vigour to its capacity to convey a similarity, it generates a sameness with the represented' (Boehm 1997: 330, translation mine).<sup>7</sup> In Boehm's reading, the so-called *Bilderverbot* recognizes this capacity, which he regards as the very reason for the interdiction for humans to make images of God.<sup>8</sup> Boehm acknowledges that there is need for a historical investigation of the concrete theologies developed by the enemies and friends of images. While I have reservations regarding his ahistorical approach to the *Bilderverbot*, I regard the fact that he takes this interdiction as a starting point for understanding *what an image is* as a productive starting point.

Boehm conceptualizes the image not as a static form, but as a tangible outcome of a process of *Gestaltwerdung* (taking shape, formation) through which the likeness of a representation (*Darstellung*) with what it represents (*das Dargestellte*) is constituted. Evoking likeness involves a continuous balancing between the image and its referent. As long as a distinction can be maintained between the image as a representation and its referent, there is 'iconic difference'. But in conveying a likeness with something, images have the potential to *become* what they represent and thus to *make* reality – hence their perceived power and danger. When the 'iconic difference' between representation and reality is dissolved, they cease to be images. Becoming real, the image destroys itself, as it were, through an inner iconoclasm. So according to Boehm's

philosophical analysis of the *Bilderverbot*, the image, by its very nature, contains an iconoclastic potential from within. His understanding of the image as continuously balancing between its intrinsic iconic and iconoclastic dimensions is important for my purposes. Acknowledging an intrinsic iconoclasm as part of the reality-making potential of images means acknowledging the power of images to become what they depict, to render present something which is not there – including a presumed unseen divine sphere.

Pursuing Boehm's idea, it could be argued that the loss of a discrepancy between an image and its referent is what defines an idol. This raises the question of how and under what circumstances an image may become an idol – and for whom. Obviously, in many religious and secular settings, images are experienced to become real, in the sense that the mediating nature of the image is overlooked in favour of its referent. A qualification of an image as idol refers to an incapacity to observe a difference between a representation and its referent. Still it remains to be seen – and this has to be subject to detailed scrutiny – whether what outsiders see as an idol to be smashed would at all be understood as such by its users. Idols are always a figment of accusation. It is likely that those destroying an image in an iconoclastic act actually produce it as idol – echoing the logic of 'iconoclash' coined by Latour – whereas its users may be aware of the iconic difference that defines an image according to Boehm, and develop attitudes and theologies that mediate divine presence and yet retain that difference.

While I find Boehm's approach to the image insightful and stimulating, as an anthropologist studying religion my interest is not with the image as such. Nor do I share his generalizing take on images, which appear to be situated outside of actual social configurations. My basic premise is that human relations to images are constituted in the framework of specific, socially situated *visual regimes*, including those offered by religious traditions across time and space. What images should and should not depict, whether they are regarded as making real what they represent, whether they are venerated, worshipped or taken as illustrations, how they are valued, which sensations and emotions they arouse, how and where and for which purposes they are produced and reproduced, and why they are broken, are questions that must be subject to detailed investigation. To pursue such investigations, art historical work has much to offer for the contemporary study of religion, which still struggles to find a more adequate and productive conceptual access to images 'beyond the Second Commandment'. A particularly useful resource are studies of images before 'the era of art' (Belting 1990), that is, the modern era that entailed the compartmentalization of religion and art in separate domains, the rise of the museum and the emergence of art history and the study of religion as separate disciplines. Many images analysed by art historians working on ancient and medieval Europe had the status of cult images. Work on these images can be an inspiring resource for scholars in religious studies who are interested to move beyond a predominantly textual orientation of the discipline and to flesh out an approach to images as prime media of religion, next to and intersecting with objects, bodies, sounds and texts (Meyer 2012).

In *Bild und Kult* Hans Belting offers a detailed analysis of the rise of the cult image in sixth-century Christianity (1990: 101–30, 164–84). In my view, this point in time may prove to be a more apt starting point for understanding the valuation of the

image in Christianity than a turn to ancient Hebrew religion, or a conjuring of the Second Commandment as a timeless law. The ‘theologies’ around the image that were developed especially in the debates unleashed by the Byzantine image war by John of Damascus and others (1990: 170–84, 559–61) could not be grounded in an existing apology of images as a religious medium in the Christian tradition; a theological appraisal of the image had to be authorized against the backdrop of the recognition of Christ as the sole revelation of God through whom the word became flesh (in the sense of incarnation, see Kruse in this volume). In a detailed analysis Belting traces how the icon was constituted as conveying the presence of God – a view that was always haunted by the fear or suspicion that it might be seen as a substitute of God and thus slip into an idol. His book tracks subsequent theologies of cult images and the contestations generated by them, including the debates around the ‘true portrait’ of Christ (the iconic print of his face in the cloth offered to him on his way to the cross by Veronica, see also Kruse 2003: 269–306), the use of relics, the role of altar images in evoking the divine, the emergence of private devotional images (*Andachtsbilder*) up to charges of idolatry in the context of the Reformation and the subsequent Catholic responses to these critiques.

Inspired by Belting’s approach, Christiane Kruse (2003) offers a fascinating exploration of the negotiation of the potential and limits of painting by artists, scholars and theologians from the Middle Ages up to the baroque. The human imagination was regarded as indispensable to picture in the mind, through mental images, the life of Christ and the acts of God as narrated in the Bible, but it was potentially deceptive at the same time. The status of paintings of Mary, Christ and God, with regard to the adequacy and implications of their devotional use, was up for serious debates. On the one hand, they were rejected for being mere illusions that had no likeness to the presumed real, yet absent original. On the other hand, they were appraised as pictorial media that could render the divine visible as and via a painted image. The condition for the visibility of the unseen was its mediation. Kruse convincingly argues that in the debates about the capacity of paintings to show what is held to be invisible to the naked eye and can only be imagined, text and image were taken as distinct, but interrelated, media, each having their own properties, possibilities and limitations. Images were made in order to allow their beholders to see what the biblical text could not convey (but only by triggering their inner imagination). What I find particularly fascinating is Kruse’s point that paintings were acknowledged as *media*, and hence understood as indispensable to picture the divine by imaging an imagined likeness, grounded in and at the same time supplementing and surpassing the biblical text (see also Hecht 2016).<sup>9</sup>

It would lead too far to attempt to summarize these and other theological–philosophical negotiations and debates here. At stake in these theologies is the acceptance of images as mediators of the unseen, cherished and authorized against the backdrop of lurking challenges of idol worship according to which images become what they represent. For my purposes here it is sufficient to note that such a detailed tracing of what I call ‘image-theologies’ opens up the archive of the Christian past in a highly illuminating way, to which scholars of religion interested in the image as a central medium of religion, like myself, can relate easily and build upon (Meyer 2015a, b: 31–21, 197–8). The approach offered by Belting and Kruse is relevant

because it alerts us to multiple types of images – and types of behaviour and attitudes with respect to (even the same) images – in co-existing and subsequent (Christian, Western) visual regimes that, taken as a whole, lead far beyond the scope of the Second Commandment. Taking this diversity of images and the visual regimes with their ‘semiotic ideologies’ (Keane 2018) into which images are embedded into account opens up a broader scope of possibilities in the religion – image nexus. A visual regime evolving around idolatry and iconoclasm is just one – contested – possibility among others.

As pointed out in my earlier work, Belting’s ‘anthropology of images’ (2001) can fruitfully be incorporated into the study of religion so as to refine our approach to images and transcend the textual bias – without, of course, claiming that images are more immediate and privileged media of the divine than words, objects or sounds. For Belting, a painting, sculpture or other external pictorial representation is a material medium that, by virtue of its technological affordances, renders present a mental image or figure in the imagination. Involving a referential relation between a physical depiction and something which is not directly visible by itself, the image has a close affinity with religion, in that both can be understood to mediate absence into presence. Using the notion ‘iconic presence’ (2016), Belting points at the capacity of images to render present the represented ‘in and as a picture’ (2016: 235) for their beholders. Iconic presence also pertains to religious pictorial media, as ‘pictures represent deities who have no direct presence in the physical world; these deities are not held to be absent (let alone non-existent), but in need of a picture in order to become visible’ (ibid.).<sup>10</sup> The specific image-theologies woven around and legitimating images of deities, of course, are to be explored through detailed research. For the users and beholders of images, these images may be mediators, but they may also be taken as true incarnations of the divine or, at its flipside, as problematic idols. The important point here is that an approach to images as material signs which mediate between the physical world and a professed unseen is above all important as an analytical distinction for scholarly research.

Religion necessarily requires mediation in order to figure out the unseen. From this perspective, religion is conceptualized as a set of ideas and practices that pertain to a realm held not to be directly tangible, but requires certain authorized practices and forms through which it becomes somehow palpable in the immanent. I understand the multiple media employed to generate the presence of the professed unseen as tangible signs that mediate and materialize a transcendent dimension which, in turn, can only be experienced and communicated through these signs (Meyer 2012; see also Mohn 2013: 207). This occurs through multiple media – including, but not limited to, images – authorized in a religious tradition. Images are particularly powerful media to achieve this because they ‘promise’ to evoke the represented and render it present. At the same time, they are prone to fabricate it, thereby ceasing to be images and becoming the ‘real thing’ for their beholders, or according to the latter’s iconoclastic critics. Religious visual regimes, with their specific modes of figuration and embodied sensational practices, make the invisible visible and the absent present in one way or the other. They shape what and how people see, involving them in ‘looking acts’ (Morgan 1998: 8) without which nothing would be seen at all.

So in order to study the image–religion nexus beyond the Second Commandment it is advisable to engage with a long history of competing, partly overlapping, image-theologies that negotiate whether and how images (and which ones) can be employed in mediating the unseen in the Christian traditions, and beyond. It is difficult to miss the irony of the fact that scholars working on images in the period from late antiquity to early modernity appear to be more versed in the theological–philosophical debates surrounding these images, than scholars in the study of religion with their strong attention to words and texts. However, the research conducted in the context of *Bildwissenschaft* on ‘images before the era of art’ primarily focuses on the history of art and religion in Europe. The conceptual approach to images as media of an unseen can, in my view, be fruitfully employed with regard to other settings. But the specific shape of image-theologies, especially those inflected with an idolatry discourse in the frontier areas of European imperial and missionary outreach, is up for further research. In the third and last section of this chapter, I will turn to the export of the notion of idolatry to the West African coast. Inspired by the work of Boehm, Belting, Kruse and others, I will sketch the co-existing, competing and yet intersecting theologies with regard to images, as well as objects and bodies, in this setting.

## Producing idolatry

The various iconoclasm and ensuing theological debates in the various Christian traditions are often framed as a matter of the past, having come to an end with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. In the public outcry over the iconoclasm committed in the name of Islamic State in such world heritage sites as Hatra, Mosul and Palmyra, the sixteenth-century iconoclasm in the aftermath of the Reformation usually were remembered as ambivalent: as somewhat shameful because of the violence involved in the smashing of idols, but as nonetheless a useful step in the rise of an understanding of images as (mere) representations that befits not only radical Calvinists, but also secular, civilized modern people. However, what is often overlooked when pondering the iconoclastic past of Christianity is the steady export and affirmation of the iconoclastic attitude that characterized Christian missionaries’ attitudes in preaching the gospel in the frontier zones of European expansion from the colonization of America throughout the world up to our time. Nowadays this attitude is often carried on by Pentecostals across the globe.

Protestant mission activities took off on the West African coast on a massive scale in the nineteenth century. Missions endorsed the long-standing theological discourse on idolatry, thereby transmitting it into the context of the colonization and missionization of Africa. This discourse incorporated the notion of the fetish that had emerged in the aftermath of late-fifteenth-century contacts between Portuguese traders and Africans, and that had become a key term for European traders, missionaries and scholars to debate the vesting of human-made artefacts with supernatural powers. Rather than referring to a long-standing, historically authentic African attitude to images and objects, the term ‘fetish’ indicates a mimetic appropriation of Catholic sacred objects – statues of Mary, crucifixes – by Africans from sixteenth-century Portuguese merchants. This implies

that, paradoxically, Africans only *became* fetish and idol worshippers and adepts of Satan as a consequence of their contacts with Catholic traders and missionaries (Kohl 2003: 19–20). While, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Catholic missionaries sought to make Africans replace their cult objects – disqualified and renamed as idols and fetishes – with Christian sacred objects, Protestants polemically designated Catholicism itself as fetishist and dismissed both indigenous African priests and Catholic priests as frauds. This stance flowed into eighteenth-century Enlightenment critiques of religion, according to which both were equally superstitious and irrational. The *Bilderverbot* was framed as mirroring a sublime capacity (of Jews, Muslims and Protestants) to imagine the divine negatively, through the interdiction of picturing it (as suggested by Kant, see above, and Bukdahl in this volume). The fetish – as idol – was associated with a view of Catholicism as backwards and of Africa as dark and primitive. Serving as an inverted mirror to assert Western superiority, the notion of the fetish blinded enlightened scholars to recognize the ideas and practices with regard to objects and images behind – and gradually enmeshed with – the terms fetishism and idolatry in African people's own understanding (Böhme 2006: 178–86; Kohl 2003: 18–29, 69–91).

Missionary preaching – both Catholic and Protestant – popularized the entangled notions of fetish and idol, which were employed to attack indigenous religious practices; their consistent use 'created a social reality that was reproduced over and over again throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century' (Leyten 2015: 106).<sup>11</sup> Such verbal attacks were also made by the missionaries of the NMG. Active among the Ewe, these missionaries conveyed a total package consisting of a new lifestyle, with a new Western material culture, education and religion in the name of the Second Commandment. They typically condemned what they regarded as pagan worship of idols and inscribed the Ewe into the Christian script according to which they were the cursed sons of Ham who had broken away from, and were to be led back to, the monotheistic Ur-God.

According to the dictionary of the Ewe language by the former NMG missionary and later professor of African languages Diedrich Westermann, the generic (Northern) Ewe term for god, *trɔ̃*, was rendered as the translation for *Götze* (German for idol), and the newly coined term *trɔ̃subɔla* (*subɔ* meaning 'serving', also rendered as worshipping) designated *Götzendienst* (German for idolatry) (Westermann 1906: 86). As noted, in missionary preaching, idol and fetish were used as synonyms, and the custodians of the gods were consistently called *Fetischpriester* (German for fetish priests, or even *Fetischdirnen*, German for fetish harlots). While Westermann's dictionary renders *dzo* (fire, magic) as *Fetisch*, and *dzosasa* as *Fetischdienst*, the missionaries also translated *dzo* as *Zauber* (German for charm), which they took as a special trait of the Ewe – perhaps rightly so, as up to our time the Ewe are renown (and feared) by other people in Southern Ghana for their powerful charms. 'Heathendom', with its local gods, spirits, charms and practices, was framed by the missionaries and their African converts as an abode of the Christian devil – termed *Abosam*, after the horrible bush monster Sasabonsam (Meyer 1999: 77–8) – whom the Ewe were considered to worship, albeit without being aware of it.

Exploring these encounters and the local appropriations of Christianity that came out of them through historical and ethnographic research, I noted that the notions of the idol and the fetish have always indicated a minefield of contestations between

missionaries and Ewe. Converted Africans were asked to renounce their idols and destroy them – a performative act required over and over again to affirm the uncompromising striving for purity of missionary Protestant Christianity (cf. Keane 2007). With the establishment of colonial rule, people increasingly turned away from indigenous religious traditions towards Christianity. While there were many reports about people ‘sliding back to heathendom’, often because they did not find the new faith sufficiently effective in combatting evil, indigenous cults were increasingly abandoned. Many cult images and objects were destroyed or handed over to missionaries who would take them home to Europe and exhibit them as material testimonies of the idolatry they sought to eradicate (Leyten 2015).

It is difficult to reconstruct Ewe religious ideas and practices at the time, as they were mainly described from a missionary perspective. Next to reports, intended for a broader German-speaking audience in support of the NMG, in which the terms idol and fetish were continuously used as markers of heathendom, the missionaries also produced linguistic and ethnographic work. Especially important is the work of the missionary Jacob Spieth, who wrote extensively about Ewe religion (1911). According to Spieth, for the Ewe the invisible, spiritual world was the bearer of life that had preceded the physical world, in which it became clothed in solid matter. The physical was understood as entangled with the invisible, spiritual dimension (1911: 4–5). Typical for a Protestant missionary, he paid little attention to the material and ritual dimension through which the gods and spirits became tangible for people. The *legba* figures that act as messengers between the sphere of humans and gods were anthropomorphic images, albeit with a high degree of abstraction. But most of the *trɔwo* of the Ewe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were not represented via physical (carved) images, and conversely images were not understood to be the privileged media through which they appeared. In this sense, the *trɔwo* did *not* conform to the notion of idol – in the sense of an image representing its referent by suggesting a likeness that is taken as real and worshipped as a god – by which they were dismissed through missionary translation and preaching. *Trɔwo*, such as the sky, rivers, mountains, termite mounds, pieces of iron and the like, were not represented through images that suggest a presumed likeness, but were held to be – temporarily – present in power objects such as bundles or pots containing herbs, bones, liquids and other substances. They would also take hold of people’s bodies through possession, and appear in people’s dreams. Rather than corresponding to the idealtypic idol, these power objects may come closer to the understanding of the fetish, in the footsteps of Charles de Brosses, as ‘neither emblematic nor symbolic, neither figurative nor representational’ and thus ‘a thing in itself’ (Morris 2017: 147, see also Pels 1998).

Popular missionary framing of Ewe religion as idolatrous was not only derogatory, but exaggerated the role of images in existing Ewe religious practice. At stake is a more complicated idea about the gods and spirits becoming present through material forms and human practices and thus of an alternative ontology or theology that regarded matter and spirit as irredeemably entangled, rather than opposed. The point was not to create and worship images that suggest a likeness with a god, but to make objects in which gods could dwell, and to allow human bodies to be permeable so that gods could get in. Of course, this is not to claim the non-existence of iconographies of the spiritual, as the *trɔwo* were recognizable in their physical manifestations during possession (with

humans acting as their image through embodiment). The imagination of the unseen was figured and sensed through other means than images alone.

And yet the idolatry discourse proved to be resilient and productive. It would be wrong to merely understand it as a missionary misrepresentation of Ewe religion. The latter being dynamic and flexible, the notion of idolatry *produced* new ideas and practices. The Catholic use of images for devotion may even have formed a source of inspiration for embracing images more strongly as religious media. The point is that there are good reasons to argue that in the course of the twentieth century images became more important media for rendering spirits present. This can be inferred from, for example, the deployment of the Mami Water cult, which entails colourful images and carvings of this spirit represented as a European woman with a fishtail (e.g. Wendl 1991; Meyer 2015b: 210–16).

When I started my ethnographic research in the late 1980s, to my initial surprise I noted that the missionary understanding of local gods and spirits as idols was still alive and kicking. Pentecostal Christianity – with its strong reliance on the Holy Spirit and the framing of the body as prime medium to sense divine presence – qualifies local traditional cults as dirty and polluting instances of idolatry. In the same vein, family gods are dismissed as demonic and people are called upon to get rid of them, or at least to protect themselves against their influence. Former devotees of local gods – or people experiencing encounters with these gods in their dreams – are exorcized, so as to be ‘delivered’ and ‘born again’. This negative take on indigenous traditions is enhanced by the popular video film industry (Meyer 2015b, see below), that also features the dangers of idolatry and shows in vivid images how the ‘powers of darkness’ that operate through local gods are at work and seek to harm people. For Pentecostals, idolatry is real – and taken to evolve around physical images. They promote an inverted image-theology that, in contrast with the careful attempts to retain images notwithstanding the interdiction of worshipping idols in the Christian tradition as documented by Belting and Kruse, reproduces African deities as idols that are to be destroyed.

Take, for instance, a Pentecostal booklet *100 Facts against Idolatry* (2009) by the Nigerian Born Again overseer of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries Dr D. K. Olukoya that was a popular read in Ghana around 2010 (when I bought it in a Christian bookshop). The author explains that Nigeria – and for that matter Africa – served idols for far too long and that God laments this situation:

What is the greatest problem of the Blackman? It is idolatry. Idolatry has led to divine punishment extended even to future generations. Idolatry is a system devised by the devil to control the land, the family and the people. It is an abomination. It is a form of contention and rebellion against God. It promotes false worship, deceptions as well as animal and human sacrifice. (Olukoya 2009: 7)

The passage is immediately followed by a quote of Exod. 20.2-5, which is explained by a harsh statement:

God hates idolatry with perfect hatred. He sees idolatry as spiritual prostitution. Once there is idolatry there is divine wrath. People should recognize that idolatry is a kind of marriage covenant. Africa has the largest altars and the largest number

of idols. Africa has ignited strange fire and raised evil smokes to the devil, insulting God to His Face. (2005: 8)

A loud echo of nineteenth-century missionary preaching, the author goes even further in introducing an angry God who feels insulted and who curses idol worshippers, but is also prepared to have mercy on them, provided they leave their idols behind. Over the past years, the Ghanaian Osofo Kyiri Abosom (translated as ‘pastor hates idols’, *abosom* being the term for gods in Twi, which like the *trɔwo* of the Ewe were framed as idols; see, for example, Leyten 2015: 78–80) has been destroying shrines across Ghana, both upon invitation of custodians, who want to get rid of the responsibility of taking care of the spirits and their paraphernalia, and as part of a broader assault against pagan idols in the framework of spiritual warfare.<sup>12</sup> His destructions are broadcast via his commercial TV channel; certain scenes show him with an axe in his hand slaying idols in their head, reminiscent of the iconic video-recorded assaults of IS (see <https://youtu.be/Jpk3M8iZvcQ>).

Even though not all Born Again Christians would speak about idolatry as harshly as these pastors, their anti-idolatry stance is widely shared. Indigenous traditions are understood as dangerous dwelling points of the powers of darkness that threaten to attack people and keep them in their grip. Many Pentecostals are therefore reluctant to acknowledge images of local gods – for example, sculptures, masks, paintings through which gods are (increasingly) understood to materialize as idols – as well as traditional drum rhythms and dances as valuable forms of cultural heritage. In so doing they challenge the policy of the postcolonial state to promote a positive appraisal of the past and the recognition of its moral and aesthetic values, which, however, no longer takes seriously as really existing entities the spirits and gods associated with this past (De Witte and Meyer 2012; Meyer 2015b: chapter 7).

What, then, is idolatry for Pentecostals? The point here is to grasp the complex ways in which, in their inverted image-theology, the divine and the satanic, anti-idolatry and idolatry are clearly separated while one side always presupposes the other which is included and rejected at the same time. What fascinated me in my research from the outset is the persistent talking about the idols that true Christians are to leave behind, which yet become manifest in their world of lived experience, especially through dreams, but also through possession. As I argued extensively, the figure of the Christian devil served as both a principle of rejection and inclusion, allowing for the ‘pagan’ gods and spirits and their material forms to remain present, albeit as evil forces. He is a boundary figure who includes non-Christian spiritual entities into the Christian universe, and at the same time is to be cast out (‘You devil, go away from me!’).

Over and over again, I was told that ‘the spiritual’ (in Ewe: *le gbɔgbɔme*) is entangled with ‘the physical’ (in Ewe: *le nutilame*), implying that spiritual forces act in the physical world, but cannot be seen via the naked eye, and thus depend on a superior spiritual eye to be discerned. This is the prime capacity of Pentecostal pastors, as well as of indigenous priests. Spirits, I learnt, move about and are able to inhabit any form, which means that anything inhabited by them can become an idol (and even objects which do not offer figural representations). This means that, for Pentecostals, idols are not limited to particular traditional shrines and traditional sculptures – which often

do not claim to refer to a spirit through likeness, but surreal abstraction. The category of idol also came to include masks and figurines made for decorative purposes as well as mass-produced sculptures and posters depicting Jesus, Mary and Saints (Meyer 2010). Many Pentecostals reject such images for being idols (or, if they have them, explicitly characterize them as merely decorative). Nonetheless the spiritual unseen – battleground between the powers of darkness and divine power – speaks to their imagination very much. There is a continuous engagement with the invisible, spiritual dimension of idolatry, which is invoked by a great deal of Pentecostal pastors in an obsessive manner, thereby continuously recalling that from which Born Again Christians are asked to turn away. In so doing, the Pentecostal imagination is geared to the unseen, keen to get revelations about the operation of hidden, occult forces in the material world. Paradoxically, the zealous rejection of idolatry demands its constant imagination and figuration. This occurs through vivid narratives – sermons, testimonies, rumours – that are transfigured into paintings, posters and movies. Picturing the occult, through words and images, is itself understood as an iconoclastic act, through which what remains invisible to the eye is dragged into the limelight of the Holy Spirit and exposed.

As I showed in my book *Sensational Movies* (Meyer 2015b), the locally produced films that were highly popular between the 1990s and early 2000s tied into the common understanding of the spiritual and physical realms as invisible, yet effectively entangled. A particular type of movie, which I circumscribe as ‘film as revelation’, set out to audio-visualize the occult. I traced the transfiguration of narratives about occult powers into moving images (Meyer 2015b: chapters 4 and 5), which yielded spectacular, albeit recurrent and stereotyped, depictions of idols. Suggesting that video film-makers act as modern high priests of the imagination, I looked at their movies as displaying a Pentecostal visual regime in action. The films are dismissed by traditional priests and intellectuals as misrepresentations of indigenous religion, but have a resilient impact on how Christians imagine African gods. My point here is that the notion of idolatry, rather than simply rejecting (and misrepresenting) indigenous worship practices, triggers the imagination and evokes a desire for figurations of the unseen which pretend to reveal how the powers of darkness operate, and which are ultimately defeated by divine power (preferably represented through light, fire and the like). Local movie productions offered highly sensational audio-visual figurations of the unseen, thereby creating ever more image-like idols for the screen that populate viewers’ imagination of how the spiritual and the physical are folded into one another.

While the movies have lost popularity by now, the imaginations of the occult shaped by them live on even in attempts to recapture indigenous religion in a positive manner. For example, in a recent video clip by the Ewe artist Azizaa (Ewe for ‘little people’ in the bush, or dwarfs) titled ‘Black Magic Woman’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bf eGpcmfMBA>), two aggressive Pentecostal pastors are charmed to follow the lady they try to convert into the bush, where she turns out to be a priestess seated on a stool and is accompanied by other priests and spirits, and a drum with eyes (see Figure 4.1 a,b). The scene could have come straight out of a Ghanaian movie. So here an attempt to challenge the Pentecostal dismissal of indigenous cults as idolatry resuscitates the very same images employed to depict the occult unseen in the Pentecostal imagination.

(a)



(b)



**Figure 4.1a, b** Screenshots from 'Black Magic Woman' (performed by Azizaa).

So, having reached the end of the third part of this chapter, let me briefly rehearse the trajectory. The central concern of this chapter is to further a scholarly approach to images – their appraisal as well as their rejection – from a position beyond the Second Commandment. As pointed out, Latour's reference to the Second Commandment as a law prescribing an iconoclasm which is impossible to realize, and which triggers iconoclastic outbursts, has certain limitations. Neglecting alternative stances to images, his scenario of modernity is of little help to grasp the ways in which the various Christian traditions have found ways to reconcile a religious use of images with (a softer interpretation of) this commandment. To achieve this, art historical works along the lines of Boehm, Belting and Kruse offer important insights, in that their approach to images as mediators of a professed (religious) unseen helps to unpack the complex

image-theologies developed in the Christian traditions. Clearly, idolatry is in the eye of the beholder. Many users of images, who understand them to generate divine presence, may well maintain (albeit implicitly) a view of images as media, rather than as a divine thing that is worshipped as such. The Protestant missionaries of the NMG, however, did not appreciate such subtle image-theologies (which they would associate with Catholicism and find basically idolatric). Approaching Africa as the land of idols, they communicated the Christian notion of idolatry along with the figure of the devil in their sermons. This clearly misrepresented the views of the Ewe, according to whom gods and spirits could inhabit natural sites, objects, people and, to some extent, images, but for whom images were not the preferred media for rendering the unseen present for humans. The assault of idolatry not only triggered the destruction of the material culture related to particular indigenous deities (or their transfer to European ethnographic museums). It also proved a productive discourse that constituted a new social reality, in which these deities became evermore like idols. The inverted image-theology of the Pentecostals generated a constant rejection of indigenous gods as idols, entailing a profuse call on believers to imagine the powers of darkness, which are to be exposed through figuration in words and images. Clearly, the fight against idols does not lead beyond the visual but relies on it. Reflecting on the steps taken in this trajectory, I conclude that charges of idolatry and subsequent iconoclasm in the Christian context can only be fully understood if the full scope of attitudes to images – from iconophobic to iconodule stances – is taken into account. Even the rejection of images requires a sound understanding of their use and appeal.

### Epilogue: ‘By all means Satan will die’

Luther’s fellow campaigner in Wittenberg, Alexander von Bodenstein, alias Karlstadt, preached fiercely against idolatry. In his polemical text *Von abthung der Bylder* (1522) he explained that *Ölgötzen* (statues, figures, idols) and *Bilder* (images) should neither be worshipped nor feared. He rejected the argument made in defence of their use – also by Luther – that they were the books of the illiterates and could serve as mere illustrations. For Karlstadt, images were deceptive and dangerous. Beholders would take them into their hearts and feel love towards them. But he admitted that, having been raised in a Christian world in which images were venerated, he feared to get rid of them:

Therefore I am afraid to burn an idol. I am frightened that the stupid devil would hurt me, although I (on the one hand) have the Scripture and know that images can do nothing and have neither life, blood nor spirit. And yet, on the other hand fear holds me captive and makes me be afraid of a pictured devil, a shadow or the sound of a light leaf, and I dodge what I should manfully go for (e.g. burning images). (Karlstadt 1522: 23, translation mine)<sup>13</sup>

What I find particularly intriguing in this statement is Karlstadt’s association of images with the devil, a terrifying figure whose existence was beyond doubt. His statement fits in with Reformed polemics against Catholicism as misguiding believers to worship

Satan. With Boehm we could say that Satan is held to efface the iconic difference, thus allowing the image to become an idol. Prone to lure beholders into deceptive illusions, images were dismissed by Karlstadt as a potentially demonic, scary and difficult to get rid of medium, while the biblical text was the privileged medium of God.

Contrast this take on the danger of images with the painting titled *By All Means Satan Will Die* (Figure 4.2) by the Ghanaian artist Kwame Akoto alias Almighty God. Akoto, a Born Again Christian, is a famous popular artist who has his workshop at Juame junction in Kumasi (Meyer 2015a: 348–9; Ross 2014). He paints signboards, portraits and all sorts of motifs from the Christian imagination, including the Sacred Heart of Jesus, witches and the devil. In the painting Satan is depicted standing in the bush in a reddish gown with a third eye on his forehead and his eyes covered by sunglasses. He stands in the light, shining. His wings mark him as the fallen angel of light, Lucifer. Two men with rifles aim at him, one rifle touching the devil's nose. While certainly agreeing with Karlstadt's anti-idolatric stance, as a painter Akoto uses the image as a medium to confidently assert the sure future death of Satan, and perhaps even as a means to kill him. Nothing can better illustrate the paradoxes entailed in the figuration of the unseen produced under the banner of a rejection of idolatry, looked at from beyond the Second Commandment.



**Figure 4.2** *By All Means Satan Will Die* (painting by Kwame Akoto 'Almighty', collection Birgit Meyer).