Introduction: Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

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The excellence of divine things does not allow them to be offered to us uncovered, but they are hidden beneath sensible figures.

Meister Eckhart

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are commonly perceived to have more or less uneasy relations to images, especially images representing the divine. They all tend, at least nominally, to privilege verbal over pictorial media, preferring the spoken, sung or written word, and have often been understood to embrace a more-or-less rigid aniconism. However, when inspecting actual practices in these religious traditions across history, a more nuanced and complex picture emerges. Different trajectories within Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions appear to embrace specific regimes that mould and direct the senses: embodied habits, standards for figuring, seeing, displaying and sensing the professed unseen through what we could call, with Meister Eckhart, 'sensible figures' (1936: 649, n745). Such regimes are not everywhere the same, and they are rarely explicitly formulated as such. But they are nevertheless there, silently bearing witness to the utter inadequacy of the convention to single out word and text as *the* canonical media of the so-called Abrahamic religious traditions. And yet, a lingering aniconism has so far been the conceptual and normative backdrop and common denominator also in academic study of these three traditions. Intended as a corrective of such bias, this volume calls for new analytical perspectives and for studying specific figurations and sensations of the unseen across various strands of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The fact that this volume assembles scholarship on Judaism, Christianity and Islam does not rest on a claim of an underlying similarity with regard to monotheism and a presumed aniconism under the label of the Abrahamic traditions (see Uehlinger, 102). On the contrary, we seek to problematize that claim – and its politics of use in various scholarly, religious and societal arenas – by confronting it through detailed case studies. Our intention is to open up scholarly inquiry towards the perplexing variety of practices of imagining and picturing the unseen – via internal and external, figural and non-figural images as well as words and sounds – within and across these traditions. Assembling cases from different strands in Judaism, Christianity and Islam and from the afterlives of Christian images in the spheres of art and literature allows us

to get varieties into the picture, while certain general issues with regard to the question of how to study the complexities of imagining and accessing the unseen also come into view. Our intention is decidedly non-normative on the issue of whether and how legitimately to represent the divine, in that the contributions explore debates about the representability of God but refrain from stating whether the positions taken are defendable or not.[1]

The unseen is marked as unavailable to direct sight. Subject to manifold restrictions, its representation is a complicated and contested matter. Desires to render the invisible as visible and tangible, for sensing the unseen, are paradoxically confirmed as well as contested and controlled by the various visual regimes in vogue, which are entangled with broader sensational or aesthetic regimes. This yields a wide spectrum of stances and habitual attitudes, from appraisals of iconic images that represent the divine, to their dismissal as 'idols', from the embracing of visual signs alluding to the divine without suggesting likeness, to an indifferent attitude towards visual forms. Practices within Judaism, Christianity and Islam offer intriguing cases for a rethinking of the complex nexus of religion and pictorial media. Such a conceptual reconfiguration needs to be multidisciplinary and must move beyond taking unqualified notions of aniconism as the normative and conceptual default in these religions.

Beyond aniconism

As pointed out by Milette Gaifman (2017) in her introduction to a recent special issue on aniconism, the term itself is of relatively recent origin. It was coined by classical archaeologist J. W. Overbeck in 1864 in relation to primordial Greek art, which he presumed to lack anthropomorphic representations of the gods. For Overbeck, aniconism implied a non-existence of images – imagelessness (*Bildlosigkeit*) – which was due to the prevailing idea that 'unseen forces could not be envisioned as anthropomorphic and hence could not be represented in images' (Gaifman 2017: 337). They could, however, be represented through natural symbols. Interestingly, Gaifman suggests to 'deploy "aniconic" to describe a physical object, monument, image or visual scheme that denotes the presence of a divine power without a figural representation of the deity (or deities) involved' (ibid., see also Uehlinger, 122). In this understanding, aniconic representations are part of a religious visual and material culture and are to be analysed as such.

However, especially in relation to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the term aniconism has been mainly employed by theologians and other scholars of religion, echoing the standpoints of religious elites, to denote a normative interdiction to represent divinity in *any* material or visual form. In this sense, it is part of theological and ideological apologies that reject the use of images as a fundamental feature of these three traditions. It is mobilized, for instance, by Calvinists, Puritans or Pentecostals against the use of images in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, as well as in other religious traditions outside of the Abrahamic spectrum. And so aniconism means de facto anti-iconism and is employed as a synonym of the so-called Second Commandment that is evoked in a normative manner so as to insist on a historical

and normative image ban (*Bilderverbot*) with regard to images of God, and even of all living beings, and to legitimate the fight against 'idolatry'. Notwithstanding fundamental critiques and the pioneering works in the study of religious images and material culture by scholars as David Morgan (e.g. 1998, 2012, 2015, 2018), Brent Plate (2015) and Sally Promey (2014),[2] the use of aniconism along these rather crude and extreme lines also extends into contemporary research on Judaism, Christianity and Islam and other fields, as many instances – for instance, the strategic references to the Second Commandment in the work of W. J. T. Mitchell and Bruno Latour (see the chapters by Sherwood and Meyer) – testify.

Our volume takes issue with this stance and seeks to open up broader perspectives. Three key points stand out. *One*, a normative view of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as being radically aniconic does not live up to historical evidence. It overlooks that the so-called aniconic passages in biblical literature are surrounded by less restrictive passages, and situated in archaeologically documented practices of rich use of pictorial media for cultic purposes (see the chapters by Stordalen, Uehlinger, Sherwood). Catholic and Orthodox traditions negotiate and employ images for making the invisible visible (see the chapters by Luehrmann, Norderval, Kruse), while in Judaism and Islam there have been and still are practices of depicting the divine (Bland) or the Prophet Muhammad and other motifs (Gruber, Khosronejad). This being so, scholars of religion should be wary to reproduce (in part partisan) normative theological claims as factual descriptions, and rather ground their analysis in historical, archaeological, art historical and anthropological records.

Second, our volume is up against the narrowness of an 'epistemic regime' (Uehlinger, 121) grounded in a presumed aniconism and image ban. The transmission of these arguably theological or emic concerns into the study of religion limits the scope of questions to be asked about the use and value of images, focusing all attention on the issue of the legitimacy of images employed to represent divinity. Once we are prepared to move beyond the conceptual deadlock of the Second Commandment, try to 'escape the straitjacket of modern preconceptions' (Bland, 128) with regard to Judaism and Christianity (see the chapters by Sherwood, Bland, Meyer) and discard the assumption of a timeless overarching image ban pertaining to Islam (Shaw and Gruber, see also Flood 2013), many more facets of the ways through which the unseen is imagined, imaged, sensed and experienced emerge, foregrounding multiple sensations in a multisensory and even synaesthetic manner, rather than focusing on visuality and seeing alone. Doing so requires a critical reflection on the implications of the long dominant mentalistic bias that ensued a problematic indifference towards other than verbal media and a strong focus on signification and hermeneutics in the study of religion as well as in post-Enlightenment conceptualizations of culture and society.

Third, a refutation of the notion of aniconism in the sense of anti-iconism as inappropriate may ensue a too narrow take on images as mere material representations or on images as the sole possibilities through which the presence of the unseen can be evoked. While several authors explore the use of images in the three traditions, it is not our concern to stubbornly spotlight a lingering 'iconism'. As argued, for instance, by Wendy Shaw, in the Islamic tradition an elaborate concern with images and visuality only emerged in the thirteenth century, whereas before that time Islamic

scholars were above all interested in musical aesthetics as the prime form of mimetic representation. This indicates that in trying to understand how the unseen becomes tangible and experienced, it is advisable to acknowledge that there is more than 'the image question' alone (even though contemporary commotions around images of the Prophet Muhammad evoke strong negative responses by certain Islamist strands). Moreover, our volume seeks to complicate a simplistic, common-sense take on images as merely 'giving something to see' (Behrend, 185). The contributors do so by attending to the ways in which images are employed to conceal as much as they show, depicting the 'real absence' of an unseen God (Gruber) and producing 'iconoclastic icons' of forbidden photographic portraits via an 'aesthetics of withdrawal' (Behrend) or an 'aesthetics of the non-representable' according to which the empty seat in Solomon's Temple remains in the dark (Stordalen), or invoking a sense of a sublime via abstract forms and light (Bukdahl).

In sum, the basic idea of this volume is that a focus on figurations and sensations of the unseen allows to expand the rather narrow scope of questions arising around the legitimate use of images and the so-called *Bilderverbot*, towards a broader exploration of sets of practices through which humans mediate and sense the unseen, and struggle over legitimate ways in doing so. These struggles occur among learned elites in these traditions, as well as between clergy and common people (as in Kreinath's chapter on struggles about the recognition of Marian apparitions, or in Khosronejad's chapter about the existence of popular murals of Saints in Qajar Iran that clash with Sunni and Shiite theologians' interdictions of depicting human beings) or in colonial settings in which Western missionaries dismiss African worship of (non-figural) gods and spirits as idolatry, analysed by Meyer. Once scholars do not take aniconism as the conceptual and normative default in the study of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, more complex and productive questions arise. Grounded in Jewish studies, biblical studies, Islamic studies, religious studies, anthropology and art history, the contributors to this volume address these questions through detailed explorations that seek to complicate facile ideas about a presumed prevailing image ban.

Religion and the unseen

'Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto' (James 1917: 53). We agree with William James that the dimension of an unseen order – imagined in whatever ways – is at the core of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and arguably of other religious traditions as well. Religion involves an awareness of a professed unseen that is taken to be existent and yet requires special forms to become manifest to common human sensation. Religion is about human attempts to render the invisible as *somehow visible* and the elusive as *somehow tangible* through forming and promoting embodied practices that shape what and how people see and sense (Orsi 2012: 147). We stress 'somehow' in order to highlight that the recognition of a trace or representation of a religious unseen that cannot be seen as such is subject to

intense negotiation and deliberation, and involves contested desires and anxieties. As the unseen is never congruent with its presumed representation, there arises a sense of a 'rest-of-what-is' (Port 2010) that indexes traces of an unrepresentable excess in the slipstream of any attempt to represent the unseen.

As pointed out in earlier work (Meyer 2012, 2013; Stordalen 2013), it is productive to approach religion as a practice of mediation between humans and a – professed, imagined, construed – unseen. The notion of the unseen allows us to take into account a larger array of possibilities for visualization than the notion of the invisible. Images may be employed to depict and represent a professed unseen. Medieval painters developed sophisticated image-theologies in legitimating their works as alternative media to convey a sense of the unseen next to the biblical (Kruse 2003, this volume) or Qur'anic text (Gruber). There is a constant perceived danger that images, by virtue of their capacity to become what they represent, are taken as real, yet illicit, simulacra (Boehm 1997). This plays out markedly in the sphere of the Abrahamic trajectories that stand central in this volume. Pictorial representations of God and holy figures as well as of 'pagan' gods and spirits are, according to certain iconophobic beholders, dismissed as potentially idolatrous (Meyer). But images may also be employed to show that something *cannot* be seen (or not in full), to depict something as being withdrawn from the view of beholders – in short, to visualize an unseen *as* unseen (Behrend, see also Behrend 2013). Paradoxically, the unseen depends on mundane means and human acts in order to be rendered present. These means include images, through which a sense of 'iconic presence' is generated for beholders (Belting 2016, see also Meyer, 87).

Obviously, circumscribing religion as mediation along these lines necessarily involves a twist that accommodates an inner, emic perspective according to which that unseen does exist, whereas it does not exist as such from the standpoint of critical social–cultural analysis. For a serious exploration, religion is not reducible to being a mere one-dimensional, mundane and 'flat' phenomenon – nothing but an illusion. A deeper understanding requires that scholars pay due attention to the practices and ideas through which the unseen becomes real and tangible for religious practitioners. This drives the contributions to this volume, whose authors explore the authorization of images, words or other forms to mediate the unseen with regard to various moments in Abrahamic trajectories and, as in the chapters by Brunotte and Kruse, their resilient revenants in modern post-Christian settings.

The condition of the visibility – or more broadly: presence – of the unseen is its mediation (Behrend, Dreschke, Zillinger 2014; Stolow 2005, 2012; Vries 2001). Paradoxically, the mediations employed to express an unseen depend on the use of means and media available to regular human sensation. A professed invisibility is part and parcel of a regime of showing via images and other forms that authorizes these forms as conveying viable traces, revelations or negations. The mediation of the unseen is not simply a question of making an invisible visible, by dragging it into the light of the immanent. Such processes of visualization are subject long-standing metaphysical and theological deliberations in Judaism, Christianity and Islam and depend on established procedures and an authorized 'apparatus' to figure the unseen and make it sense-able (Gruber, see also Geimer 2018: 140–69). With regard to the

divine which is understood to exist and yet not to show itself directly, the possibility of its representation rests on authoritative theological propositions, habitual practices and beliefs. Stordalen articulates the difficult-to-resolve question as follows: 'How does one represent that which is conceived to be non-representable or not suitable for exposure?' (21). Representing the divine in a too human manner may be taken as being equally problematic as fully negating its representation and thus being left with (almost) nothing. Gruber's summary of a mediatory position in Islamic scholarship as contending 'that there must exist visible or traceable evidence of God's presence on earth, otherwise He would be confined to man's intellect rather than existing in Reality' (133) captures the crux of the matter not only for Islam but also for Judaism and Christianity.

Obviously, the multiple theological deliberations about this issue yield divergent arguments and stances towards mediation in general, and the suitability of images as opposed to other media in particular. If Byzantine, Calvinist and modern Pentecostal iconoclasts refute the use of images in the name of salient passages in the Hebrew Bible that stress the Mosaic command against the production and worship of images (Sherwood, Meyer, Uehlinger), the Eastern Orthodox churches as well as the Catholic and Lutheran churches negotiate the possibility for their use in the light of the same command (Luehrmann, Kreinath, Norderval, Bukdahl). While anti-iconists would reject the cultic use of any graven image as idolatry, for the Eastern Orthodox tradition studied by Luehrmann the problem of idolatry would lie 'in mentally creating a human image of God', that could only be countered by feeding believers' imagination with authorized icons (199). The recognition of a likeness between an image of the divine and the divine itself is subject to accepted conventions and embodied experiences. At stake here are varying visual and sensational regimes, with different stances towards the value and use of images and towards the role of the imagination in conveying a sense of the unseen.

Figuration and sensation

The basic idea of this volume is that a focus on figurations and sensations of the unseen offers a productive entry point for investigating the complex practices of mediation to convey the unseen that are authorized – and contested – in and across various traditions in the Abrahamic spectrum. We opt for the term figuration so as to indicate the importance of moving beyond a focus on the acceptability of material images in the light of a presumed image ban. Our attention is directed to the operation of the senses and the imagination in shaping figurations of the unseen in an encompassing manner that includes external, physical, material images as well as inner visions. We place emphasis on sensations so as to highlight that the production, use and appraisal of figurations is shaped and transmitted through embodied visual and sensational regimes that modulate how and what people see and sense.

While it is our concern to move beyond a conceptual and normative aniconism, we do not, as noted, wish to limit our focus to the issue of the acceptability of material images in the Abrahamic trajectories. This would exclude the cultivation and harnessing of

inner images in the religious imagination that may or may not be expressed in material form, and yet populate the imagination and are vested with value and meaning. And it would equally neglect the significance of figurative language and music. Why this is problematic is forcefully argued by Wendy Shaw, who calls attention to the antique concept of mimetic representation 'using any artistic intermediary – words, sounds, physical images – to signify and communicate realities beyond our physical experience' (42). Hence she cautions against the strategic, modern invocation of a normative idea of the image in relation to the presumed reservations regarding visual representations of the Prophet in Islam (which is ironic in itself, given that the image is all but taken for granted in the context of the study of Christianity). At stake here is an understanding of figuration as operating in the interface of images, words and sounds, understood as a process of imaging and shaping an unseen dimension and rendering it tangible through pictorial, written, spoken and sounding figures (see also Weigel 2015: 20–6).

This understanding resonates with and is informed by Niklaus Largier's reading of Erich Auerbach's notion of 'figura' as 'an expressive form' or 'sensory *Gestalt*' that is activated in the imagination and induces a realistic experience. While Auerbach developed figura in relation to practices of reading in classical biblical literature, Largier (2012, 2018, see also Meyer 2015: 156) extends it to a broader medieval mode of apprehension. Moving beyond a focus on the representation and signification achieved by pictorial, textual and aural signs, this mode involves a composite of perception, affects and concepts and takes figures as reality-producing, performative forms. Figures do not merely represent, but enable perception, sensation and understanding, and in so doing take part in effecting reality. This dimension is illustrated poignantly in Christiane Kruse's elaboration on incarnation as a meta-pictorial metaphor, through which the word was *shown to become* flesh in painting, rendering an image as a real human figure with a living soul in medieval and early modern painting. The break with this realistic embodiment in the art theory of the seventeenth century, as she shows, yielded ever more realistic, physiological representations of flesh, yet banished the soul; this disenchantment triggered a desire for a revival of religion as articulated by Joris-Karl Huysmans and Michel Houellebecq.

In our view, this take on figuration resonates with current critiques of a modernist, arguably Protestant overemphasis on representation and signification as the core of religion, and fits in well with attempts to recapture the material and corporeal dimensions of religion so as to grasp how imaginations of a religious unseen are vested with reality and truth (e.g. Meyer 2012; Orsi 2016; Vásquez 2011; Grieser and Johnston 2017; see also Belting 2001). Here is, in a nutshell, how we would operationalize figuration. We take as a starting point an understanding of images as involving an internal and external dimension. As Hans Belting put it succinctly, 'The picture is the image with a medium' (2011: 10; see also Mitchell 2008: 16–18). In German, both picture and image would be called *Bild*, and in our use of the term image we retain this understanding of it being constituted by a material, external and a mental, inner image. Material images invite their beholders to lift the mental image from its material carrier in the act of looking, and in this way an image seen in the world is incorporated and becomes part of and stored in a person's imagination. People may thus recognize God, Mary, Jesus, Muhammad or the devil *in* a painting or poster representing them,

and beholders may even – to their delight or dismay – sense these pictorial figures to become real in and via that representation (Morgan 1998). The image they see is, as it were, lifted from the medium of the painting or poster in the act of looking, and incorporated, feeding the imagination (and possibly hijacking it and leading it astray). Inner, mental images may be externalized as and recognized in not only material images but also via other media such as words and sounds. We refer to this spiralling process in which material images and other media trigger inner images, and inner images are expressed via various material media, as figuration. Or more precisely, as transfiguration, in that inner images may be rendered via non-pictorial external media and vice versa. Religions shape the figuration of the unseen, by identifying key tropes or what Meister Eckhart appropriately called 'sensible figures', governing their representation via particular media – in short, by embedding such a figuration in a sensational regime.

The various chapters in this volume situate the use of inner and/or external images and other media in different sensational regimes, through which the unseen becomes imaginable and experienceable. For instance, through a study of historical mural paintings in Iran, Pedram Khosronejad identifies a complex Shiite visual aesthetic in which 'visualization and seeing are central to the recollection of holiness and saintly power' (184). Sonja Luehrmann describes how in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, in order to prevent the imagination from going astray, strict aesthetic and liturgical conventions were followed for the production and use of particular icons. While here recurrent material images are employed to ensure an asceticism of the imagination, Ignatius of Loyola, as Norderval shows, developed a technique of 'spiritual exercise' that aimed at achieving a plastic experience of 'being in spiritual contemporaneity with the locus where everything happened in the story of Jesus' (213) that became central to Jesuit piety. The spiritual exercises, in sync with baroque architecture and painting, were to overpower the imagination, to revel 'in the imagining of the unimaginable' (Wölfflin quoted in Norderval, 215). And while Brunotte points at the role of the imagination to fill the 'narrative "blanks" and uncertainties in the canonical biblical stories and in ancient historical documents' (245) by religious commentators and artists – yielding the iconic figure of Salome – Bukdahl notes that 'artists from Leonardo da Vinci to Wassily Kandinsky have always been aware that the language of form can communicate experiences and knowledge that the written and spoken word are either unable to express adequately, or simply cannot capture' (229). By contrast Christiane Gruber points at the elaborate 'visual "figures of speech"' with regard to an ineffable divine that Safavid artists struggled to evoke in their paintings. Metaphorical representations of God as light abound and are transfigured into art. All these examples point at processes of (trans-)figuration at work, in which material images are attributed with different values and shift into different figural forms. Religious traditions mould and shape the imagination of their adherents via multiple, intersecting media, and differ with regard to the trust they put in the imagination and the usefulness or danger of material images.

Importantly, the use of such intersecting media and their sensible figures in deploying authorized figurations of the unseen depends on incorporated sensational regimes that become part of people's habitus and part of a shared tradition. Such regimes

involve particular 'sensational forms' through which the unseen is rendered available for common sensation, and through which the transcendent becomes available in the immanent (Meyer 2012, see also Kreinath). Sensational forms are sets of authorized practices that shape the perception by cultivating the inner and outer senses and shaping certain sensibilities. The regimes employed around the veneration of icons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Loyola's spiritual exercises or Sufi mystic imaginations of God yield distinctive, shared experiences and sensibilities through which the unseen becomes real for beholders, but may also be subject to contestations. This becomes especially marked in Kreinath's exploration of marked differences between the aesthetic regimes and related bodily sensations for Orthodox clergy and lay Christian and Alawite women in Hatay, Turkey, who experience Marian apparitions as real – much to the dismay of the clergy. Across the contributions, yet marked more or less explicitly, we find an understanding of sensation as an experiential embodied practice that yields a sense of attachment and commonality and is central to religious modes of perceiving the world and rendering the unseen as somehow visible and tangible. Religious sensational regimes produce the reality effects of religious figurations (see also Largier 2017, 2018). These figures, as the chapters by Brunotte and Kruse show evocatively, do not respect the boundaries set by the presumed vanishing of religion in the slipstream of secularization, but populate secular imaginaries and long for vesting them with new life and truth.

Contested desires

Scholarly research on aniconism and iconoclashes were occasioned, in the first place, by a series of events bearing witness to strong emotional forces triggered by conflicting regimes of depicting (or de-picturing) what should remain unseen (or seen in another way). Brunotte (247) aptly observes how Oscar Wilde recognized the potential of literary eroticism to stage a fusion between metaphysical longing and sexual desire, a staging that Brunotte pursues into opera performances of Salome. Several contributions in this volume explore elements of desire both in attempts to render the unseen to be seen and sensed, and in desires to direct and restrict such sensation. Strikingly, in the material explored by Luehrmann, a strong argument for the legitimacy in producing representations of the divine is carefully paired with an equally strong restriction on how to produce these representations and how (not) to use them. This volume originated under the premonition that the contrastive desires to portray *and* to avoid portraying that which is counted as unseen are fundamentally drawing from the same source of energy: the power generated by a sense of similarity and simultaneous difference between sensing representations of the unseen and interacting with that which these representations are held to represent. In other words, the field circumscribed in this volume is a field of perennially contested desires.

Several chapters in this volume reflect on a desire to display what cannot, or should not, be represented, *and* a simultaneous anxiety to mark a sense of distance between the representation and that which it represents. As we show above (and below), in some cases, this tension is explicitly verbalized, as in Bukdahl's analysis of the

application of Kant's category of the sublime in production and analyses of European art. Correspondingly, several authors in the volume identify artistic strategies like the employment of light, darkness or emptiness in attempts at formulating artistic conventions to capture that which professedly can be figured, but not pictured with material images (Stordalen, 33–5; Gruber, 133; Norderval, 225–7; Brunotte, 246–7; and for popular regimes, cf. Kreinath, 168). In other contributions, configurations of the same tension are expressed much more subversively, as in the 'aniconic' gist of ornamentalizing photography in the Islamic East African coast (Behrend, 194–6), or in the staging of an exchange between the invisible (but audible) prophet and the very visible (and sensual) Salome in Strauss's opera (Brunotte, 245). Meyer (89–90) records how the missionary attempts at repressing material aspects of indigenous religion actually *produced* the reality of idols that the missionaries thought they had come to dismantle – yet another pointer to the paradoxical forces of hiding and showing at work under the surface discourse even in one of the most anti-iconic arguments produced in Christian religion.

Perhaps the most fundamental insight on the contested desires of figurations of the unseen emerges in the contributions of Sherwood and Uehlinger. Sherwood traces the paradoxically ambivalent reception of the icon of the destruction of the golden calf. It occurs as a negative image (one to be defined *against*) and a positive one (to be defined *with*). In subtle ways, Sherwood claims, this reflects that in the trajectories supporting this narrative it is always difficult to know at what point *latreia* (legitimate adoration using material objects) becomes *eidolatreia* (illegitimate adoration of idols). She then makes the point that these conflicting biblical traditions of figuring out the materiality of the divine silently transferred into European philosophy, and still haunt attempts at dealing with material representations of deity. These contested desires for divine transcendence and materiality are still very much in vogue also in contemporary scholarship (cf. also Meyer, 80–4). Uehlinger's chapter details how this is very much the case in intellectual traditions like biblical scholarship or archaeology of early Israel, both of which have contributed to producing a more nuanced primary record into impressions of dominantly aniconic texts, aniconic ('Israelite') environments and a vindictive image ban in biblical literature and material culture.

Similar critique of blind spots in scholarly reproductions of desirable past 'aniconism' is launched for instance in Stordalen (21–3), Shaw (38–43). Bland (131), Gruber (132–3) or Luehrmann (210), and Kruse (272–4) chronicles a corresponding longing for a desired past in which the balance of the seen and unseen was stable and productive. In sum, the volume represents a collective archaeology of knowledge (Foucault 1969) into the various academic disciplines that have dealt with figurations and sensations of the unseen in monotheistic and scripturalizing religions. The result is a view of how one of the professedly most characteristic features of this object of research – its perennial tendency to desire *and* contest figurations of the professedly unseen – came to influence also the research itself, as it depended upon analytical categories, theological concepts and philosophical reflections that were ultimately formulated under the regime of these same contested desires. We regard this as one of the more fundamental insights of this volume, and perhaps the one that most needs to be explicated, since it is likely to be subject to the same discourse of collective neglect

and forgetfulness that has allowed the crude simplification of aniconic Abrahamic religion to live on, despite solid historical and conceptual refutation.

Overview of the volume

Part One: Reconfiguring the image question

The first part of the volume holds contributions that identify gaps in conventional analysis of pictorial media in the three monotheistic religions. Based on these gaps the chapters in this part present new analytical strategies for re-interpreting religious strategies for figuration and sensation.

In Chapter 1, Terje Stordalen first recounts how recent scholarship on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament generally agrees that early Hebrew religion was not aniconic in the sense of absence of all pictorial media. Still, certain trajectories of biblical literature unquestionably do promote worship without pictorial representations of the deity, and Stordalen takes on one of the most central passages: the narrative of the Solomonic Temple in 1 Kings 6–8. The chapter pursues the question of whether the view that there existed an imageless cult reflects a general preference for verbal over non-verbal media (what Stordalen calls 'a logocentric ideology'). The story of the temple invites the reader to imagine traversing a long-lost temple of the past. This imagined itinerary is expected to activate all forms of human sensation, including seeing iconic representations, smelling incense and sensing spatial dimensions. However, when it comes to the focal point of the plot, all sensation comes to a halt, including the hearing of words. Rather than indicating a general distrust of pictorial media, this narrative reflects a regime of sensation that relied on the interplay of verbal and non-verbal media but did not trust any medium when it came to representing the deity. For that purpose, this regime resorted to emptiness and void in all registers of sensation, a strategy that reflects a particular aesthetics of the non-representable. So, this essay opens to the call for a more nuanced consideration of the roles and interplay of different media in religious sensation, and for seeing such interplay as part of larger strategies and regimes of sensation.

In Chapter 2 Wendy Shaw sets off registering the rich representations of secular and religious visual representations in Islam throughout the centuries. She points out that the framework of 'prohibition' that is currently employed should not be taken as indicative of an overarching image ban. Almost no aniconic discussion is recorded until the thirteenth century; in the first centuries of Islam there was simply a disinterest in pictorial media for displaying the sacred. Shaw then sets out to explore a neglected interaction between arts and music in Islamic tradition, examining a late-sixteenth-century Mughal illustration in a manuscript of Nizami of Ganj's twelfth century Book of Alexander. Nizami's description of Plato playing the organ before Alexander represents and consolidates a vast literature on religious musical aesthetics. Shaw argues that the modern emphasis on the visual over musical arts reflects different receptions of the late-antique concept of mimesis, which laid the groundwork for both European and Islamic artistic practice. She points out the inadequacy of modernist ontologies of sensation for perceiving the roles of pictorial and other non-verbal media in traditional Islam.

Modern Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike risk missing the key role of sound in strategies for apprehending the divine in premodern Islamic philosophies and cultures – a role, we might add, that is still echoed in traditional Islamic recitation and prayer.

Adding further to that critique, Yvonne Sherwood, in Chapter 3, takes on the one item that most of all has become the topic for aniconism in the modern world: the golden calf, known first from the biblical story of Moses (Exodus 32) and then from innumerable receptions in art, religion and philosophy throughout the ages. According to Sherwood this figure has served as a 'hyperaniconic hypericon': an icon of the destruction of an icon, encapsulating an assemblage of knowledge, aesthetics, ethics and politics. It also became the figurative representation of the victory of the text over all pictorial media. That victory was, however, ambiguous. European modernism read the story of the destruction of the golden calf both positively and negatively: as an image to identify with and as an image against which to be identified. According to Sherwood, this double response mirrors the split function of the Bible in modernist stories about European foundations and values. On the one hand, the Bible stands as an ancient contrast to secular modernity. In this reading the destruction of the calf supports a modernist indictment of a jealous monotheistic deity with a very vindictive attitude to images. On the other hand, the smashing of the calf emerges as an early sign of the triumph of *Geistigkeit* over sensuality. For instance, to Kant and Freud the destruction of the calf represents the higher (proto-Christian, proto-universal) strand of the Old Testament: 'the heights of sublime abstraction'. We would argue that the continued preoccupation with the golden calf in European cultural history also echoes the perennial desire to figure the unseen out, also in terms of materiality, and the contesting impulse that such figuring will never represent the reality it professes to reflect.

Rounding off this part's reflection on the interactions between religion and programmes for sensing pictorial media, Chapter 4 holds Birgit Meyer's call for re-conceptualizing these interactions from a position 'beyond the Second Commandment'. The chapter makes a call for analytical scholarship to leave behind the idea that the interdiction of representational images of the divine is the normative default in the Abrahamic traditions. Meyer finds that this radical idea originated in Calvinist religion and critiques the apparently unwitting lingering of this legacy in Western secular scholarship. As a replacement for this idea, Meyer argues to open up towards a broader analysis of a range of strategies and visual regimes devoted to figurations of the unseen. The first part of the chapter offers a critique of Bruno Latour's dependence upon Calvinist interpretation of this commandment, echoed also in the work of W. J. T. Mitchell. The second part turns to the German strand of art history known as *Bildwissenschaft*, which is seen to offer important alternative takes on images and the theologies in which they are embedded. This helps understand how religion generates a sense of presence through images. Taking these approaches as a point of departure, the third part studies clashing figurations of the unseen in the export of the notion of idolatry produced by German Protestant missionaries to the Ewe in West Africa. The indigenous deities of the Ewe, which traditionally became tangible through other objects than images, were recast in Protestant religion as idols, and so dismissed as demonic. Having been *produced* through charges of idolatry, these recast

indigenous figures continuously require to be pictured. Meyer claims that even the study of rejections of images requires a sound understanding of the use and appeal of pictorial items – a claim that should be taken seriously also by current-day scholarship addressing the presence of figurations in trajectories of the three monotheistic religions, and the various regimes of sensation they become subject to.

Part Two: Genealogies of figuration

The chapters in this part of the volume portray moments in the early and subsequent history of pictorial media and aniconic ideologies in the three (nominally) monotheistic and scripturally oriented traditions. Not only do each of these traditions include strands that explicitly endorse the use of images (see Parts Three and Four). Also, in their historical past Judaism, Christianity and Islam were more tolerant towards the use of images than is commonly known. Theologians representing various periods and traditions in these religions engaged with and reflected about images in ways that point to the fundamental inadequacy of simple modernist dichotomies between verbal and pictorial media. For this reason, these chapters all extend beyond simply historically recording past figurations and sensations; they also all substantiate the claim that new analytical approaches are needed in order to do justice to these complex histories.

That claim is particularly explicit in Chapter 5, holding Christoph Uehlinger's plea for reconsidering ancient Israelite and early Jewish figurations in a visual and material religion perspective. Combining a religio-historical and critical theoretical perspective, the chapter starts by recognizing a powerful conceptual matrix that has directed most modern reflection on these issues, namely, the assumption of the nexus between the rejection of cultic images, the practising of 'aniconic' service and belief in the deity's invisibility. This matrix, Uehlinger argues, became part and parcel not only of theologies in the three religious traditions but also of Western (now secular) thought. The chapter goes on to demonstrate that early Hebrew religion was never uniformly an imageless cult for a single deity – certainly not in local and probably also not in official practices. This portrayal, which seems fairly clear in the primary historical records, has been blurred by biblical and other scholarship relying too much on the heavily ideological representations of the past rendered in biblical literature. The vision of imageless cult now dominating a large strata of biblical literature came into being only in the Persian and later times, as elite strategies for generating religious distinctions and identity in the Persian (and Hellenistic) province(s) of Yehud. Uehlinger details seven stages that produced the matrix related at the opening of the chapter, a process developing from ancient distinction to identification, via Protestant iconoclasm and scripturalism, into modernist biblical scholarship and present-day archaeology. The chapter concludes with six theses sketching the changes necessary for analytical studies to move from the iconism/aniconism paradigm into studies of aesthetic formations in the perspective of visual and material culture. Thus, taking the discussion on 'biblical aniconism' as its example, this chapter amply discloses the complex intertwining not only between historical source records and religious ideologies but also between scholarly exploration of those source records and modernist ideologies unwittingly relying on the reception history of those very religious ideologies.

Departing from the medieval illustrated Sarajevo Haggadah – a manuscript possibly commissioned by a Jewish patron in Spain for the purpose of Haggadah celebration – our late and deeply missed colleague Kalman Bland, in Chapter 6, invites his readers into a fascinating comparison of three inherently dissimilar perspectives on the reality and validity of visual art in premodern Jewish culture. The first is that of Franz Kafka, a quintessential modernist, who denies the facticity of the visual arts in Judaism. Kafka's notion of an aniconic Judaism fails to account for a phenomenon like the Sarajevo Haggadah – and many more examples of the kind. The second perspective is that of the tenth-century Islamic Brethren of Purity, who open-mindedly affirmed the universal distribution of visual arts in all cultures, including Judaism, and who saw visual arts as forms of magic. The third perspective is that of medieval Jewish philosophy (Maimonides, Judah al-Ḥarizi and Profiat Duran) and rabbinic law (Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg and Maimonides). These all affirm the validity of Jewish visual art, highlighting its pedagogic, aesthetic and psychological benefits while underscoring its neutralization of magical or metaphysical implications. The Sarajevo illuminations reveal a medieval Jewish method for tickling the fancy, refreshing the sensorium and taking delight in the surprises of visual experience. Evidently, this practice of figuration and sensation disproves common expectations of a general Jewish 'artlessness', and of crude interpretations of the so-called biblical image ban.

Chapter 7 holds Christiane Gruber's analysis of the attempts of Persian and Turkish artists in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries CE to represent God, or at least to convey a sense of the divine – thus challenging common assumptions about the totalist aniconism of Islamic traditions. Depending upon a rich variety of traditional Islamic exegetical, theological and poetical texts that describe God as theophanous, radiant, fragrant, cloud-like and transcendent, painters developed their own lexicon of forms to contribute to the broader discourse on God's nature. Gruber is able to demonstrate that painters used calculated devices and visual cues, such as light, veil and olfactory metaphors as well as colour symbolism, to convey the deistic sum (*tawhid*) of God in pictorial terms. One might say these painters articulated a medieval Islamic regime for representing the deity, and for piously seeing these figurations and employing them as religious items. In so doing, artists underscored and reaffirmed the apparent paradox that a numinous presence can be marked as much by its omnipresent reality as by its ostensible absence, what Gruber calls 'real absence'. Both strategies illustrate the interplay of art images and human imagination in the never-ending struggle to represent the unseen.

Part Three: Figurations and sensations – lives and regimes

Part Three is dedicated to anthropological explorations of the actual use of pictorial media in different trajectories of the Abrahamic traditions. The four studies document a fascinating variety and creativity in religious involvement with images, with local and temporal variations. They also spotlight how images may be used to subvert or challenge modes of religious authority that are primarily based on verbal media and conceptual reasoning. In so doing these chapters add weight and urgency to the call made in the previous parts: to develop more many-faceted analyses of the roles of pictorial media in actual practices in these monotheistic traditions.

In Chapter 8 Jens Kreinath offers an anthropological study of the aesthetics of representations of St. Mary in Muslim–Christian coexistence and exchange in the region of Antakya (Turkey), which holds remains of Jewish culture and religious belief as well. Kreinath argues that a key for understanding the dynamics of Christian–Muslim relations in specific localities of this region are the aesthetic sensations of St. Mary's appearances in dreams and healings. These are experienced by Christian and Muslim women alike after they have made vows at Marian sanctuaries. Kreinath's argument makes a distinction between the clergy and common believers in their ritual interactions with Marian icons. While the interactions of the Orthodox Christian clergy at first seem very similar to those of lay Christian women, the aesthetics of bodily sensations in Marian apparitions distinguish between lay and learned members of religion. The aesthetic regime regulating the sensations of these women is common also to Arab Alawite women, as seen in their practice of vows and wishes at Marian shrines and the experience of Marian apparitions and healings. In this case, a popular regime of sensation connects individuals across religious denominations, and it serves to distinguish within one and the same religion. This testifies not only to the need to study aesthetic regimes but also to the potential power of collective experience in such regimes.

In Chapter 9 Pedram Khosronejad reflects on Iranian folk narration and popular literature of the story of Twelver Shiism. This story appeared for the first time as illustrations in royal books of the Timurid Dynasty (1370–1506), but one particularly important testimony of the justification of the role of figurative art in Iran are religious mural paintings. It was only during the late nineteenth century that Qajar painters depicted figures of the Prophet Muhammad and other Shiite saints on a massive scale intended to be seen and used by the public. Khosronejad documents and illustrates this history and also demonstrates visual strategies and religious roles of these Persian Shiite figurations. The mural paintings illustrated in the chapter show the representations of holy figures in Persian Shiite visual culture, and the importance of their roles in devotion – topics which have until recently received little attention. In so doing, the chapter adds to the argument promoted throughout this volume.

Heike Behrend offers an analysis of restrictive and affirmative practices of photography on the East African coast (Chapter 10). The medium of photography was from the beginning contested among Muslims on the coast, because photography practices of the colonial state became associated with 'unveiling'. Thereby it collided with the aesthetic regime of the veil, yielding an aesthetics of withdrawal that was at the time dominant. So the original discontent with photography came from its being understood to violate traditional boundaries of public/private, male/female and of inside/outside. This perceived violation notwithstanding, many Muslim women and men eventually did make use of photography, albeit with caution, as a mode of self-representation to enhance their visibility and as a medium of exchange. It was only following the rise of reformist Islam in the 1980s that Muslim scholars increasingly invoked the 'Islamic interdiction of images' extended towards practices of using visual media such as photography and video. This dismissal was paired with a gendered concept of purity and seclusion. However, the use of photography continued, being particularly sensitive to one aspect of the aesthetics of withdrawal, namely, that by

the very act of showing, photography also hides something else. At the end of her chapter Behrend explores ornamentalization of photography that play with regimes of aesthetic withdrawal, yielding 'iconoclastic icons' (cf. Sherwood, above). In this East African case, the prompt for such iconic aniconism comes from the similarities *and* differences associated with the aesthetics of the veil and the camera, respectively.

Sonja Luehrmann (Chapter 11) taps into the apparent paradox in Eastern Orthodox Christianity that sustains an elaborate theology of the icon and a simultaneous suspicion against imaginative evocation of mental imagery of the divine. The debate about the boundaries between icon veneration and idolatry is explored through nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox polemics against Roman Catholic spiritual exercises as these are echoed among post-Soviet Russian iconographers and lay believers. Luehrmann interprets religious art and worship environments as sensory regimes helping believers experience their faith as grounded in sense perception. The desire to distinguish iconography from other forms of visual representation becomes especially evident when iconographers create new motifs, such as depictions of newly canonized victims of Soviet anti-religious repressions. By tracing the choices iconographers make in creating new images within an existing visual canon, Luehrmann argues that religious image practices are always about constraining and guiding the imagination as much as enabling it. Displaying this double concern in the one Abrahamic trajectory that is most explicitly embracing the use of pictorial media for veneration, Luehrmann is able to give a lucid demonstration of the necessity to study these traditions taking full account of their internal complexities.

Part Four: Desires for the unseen – art and religion

The chapters in this part study aesthetic programmes in European arts, either in the use of art for religious purposes or in the recurrence of religious motives in secular European art and literature. These examinations demonstrate how European art discourse is often very sensitive to the complex roles of figurations, sensations and pictorial media in religious experience and imagination. They also document instances of multifaceted interplays between religion and art, based specifically in human sensation of the artwork. As such, they verify and illustrate the call produced throughout this volume for reconfiguring the intellectual analysis of the roles of pictorial media within strands of religion that are so often branded as 'aniconic'.

In Chapter 12 Øyvind Norderval explores the aesthetic regimes of baroque religion by reading Gian Lorenzo Bernini's architectural plan for the pilgrim's entry to the Vatican city alongside Ignatius Loyola's *Exercitia Spiritualia*. The goal of Loyola's spiritual exercises was to lead the believer to have a sense of being imaginatively situated onto the very *locus* where the sacred story took place. Bernini's design of the route to the Vatican followed an overall scheme founded on that programme, developed from the idea of the basilica over St. Peter's grave as the goal of pilgrimage to Rome. The route starts at the bridgehead of Ponte Sant'Angelo and ends up in the high choir of St. Peter's basilica, at the cathedra. Jesuit theology played a key role in the Roman baroque, in which Bernini worked. Norderval asks whether it is also possible to find a close relationship between Jesuit mysticism and Bernini's art. Engaging in an

in-depth analysis of interaction between Loyola's text and artistic forms of expression in Bernini's project of the pilgrimage route, Norderval argues to see the pilgrimage route as a materialization of Ignatius's *Exercitia*. The route employs sculpture and architecture so as to evoke spiritual sensation and emotion, thus offering an excellent example of the possible roles of figurations and sensations in Roman Catholic religion.

Chapter 13 holds Else Marie Bukdahl's reflections on strategies across centuries of European art for representing that which ultimately is held to be non-representable. Artists of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the baroque often portrayed the divine by using abstract artistic effects. At the end of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant connected Edmund Burke's definition of 'the sublime' with the Second Commandment, taking this interdiction to express the highest insight on the matter of representing the deity. Further interpretations of Burke's and Kant's definitions of the sublime appeared in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Precisely because the sublime is associated with depictions of the sacred, and hence with a central problem in art for religious purposes, its reappearance in modern art gives rise to some of the most extreme innovations in visual art, as illustrated in recent Danish art for ecclesial use. In this line of strategies, the sublime is often represented by non-figural art where light plays a central role.

In her contribution in Chapter 14 Ulrike Brunotte considers the reception of the biblical figure of Salome in art and especially in opera. As it turns out, the very name Salome is not mentioned in the biblical stories of the death of John the Baptist; her dance lacks a narrative description and is oblivious of the 'seven veils'. These narrative 'blanks' provided spaces for the imaginative involvement of later recipients of the story, first, by religious commentators and, then, by artists. The figure of the 'dancing Salome' became an icon in Renaissance/baroque art. In the nineteenth century she was revived through narrative folk stories and literature. Since the fin de siècle dance, Oscar Wilde's play and Richard Strauss's opera, Salome is so centrally embedded in modern visual regimes that she can be defined as 'a sign of the visual as such'. Wilde's play started the production of an aesthetic spectacle of symbolist and biblical metaphors. In an opening scene of Strauss's opera, Salome's visual-bodily attraction is contrasted with the fascination of the disembodied 'holy' voice of the prophet who announces the message of God from the depths of the cistern. This dramatic configuration incorporates the interplays between words, figurations and sensations thematized in this volume. Brunotte explores the sensual mediations of the sacred in this interplay between the embodied and the disembodied voice, the visible and the invisible (but audible).

In the last contribution of the volume Christiane Kruse takes inducement from Michel Houellebecq's novel *Soumission* (*Submission*), which deals with the search for cultural identity in the aftermath of modernist secularization. The novel depicts an Islamic government taking over France in 2022, a shift substantiated by the claim that the atheist humanist thesis 'there is no God' would be utterly presumptuous, rendering the human to serve as the divine. This professedly arrogant humanism is in the novel paired with the Christian creed, that God did, indeed, become human, incarnated into human flesh. Kruse explores the role of European art in comprehending painting as, precisely, 'incarnation'. The Italian humanist painter Cennini used the term *incarnazione*

to denote the coming-into-being of a bodily image. Flesh is seen as the interphase of body and soul, and the painting of the flesh thus explicitly echoes the dogma of God becoming human. With the rise of positivism and the epoch of naturalism in the arts in the nineteenth century, spirit and soul are driven out, as it were, from painted flesh. Now the human skin is perceived merely as a membrane between outer appearance and inner physiology. The protagonist of *Soumission*, François, follows in the footsteps of Zola's contemporary Karl Joris Huysmans (author of the *Décadence* and subsequently a convert to Catholicism) into a monastery in Rocamadour, home of a black Madonna statue. Facing the sculpture, he feels reduced to his sheer physical existence, abandoned by his spirit. François loses his faith, according to Kruse an indication that the moderate Islam unfolded in the novel is equally devoid of metaphysical depth, having made the natural sciences their prime witness for the existence of God.