Religious Repercussions in Hans Belting's Anthropology of Images

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In the final chapter of his magnum opus *Likeness and presence. A history of the image before the era of art* (1994, German original 1990), Hans Belting signals that a crisis of the image occurred in early modernity. This crisis is the outcome of a process of differentiation between religion and art. As he points out, the Protestant Reformation, in the footsteps of Luther, reduced images to mere illustrations of the biblical text or, as was the case with Calvinists, rejected their use for religious purposes altogether. Concomitantly, the art history that emerged in the Renaissance domesticated the image by sidelining its earlier cultic use, subjecting it to aesthetic analysis. So, "when the images fell into the twilight, they were justified as works of art," as Belting summarizes the outcome of this process (Belting 1990, 523, my translation). While I would argue, following David Morgan (2015), that the Reformation, rather than simply sidelining or abandoning the image, inaugurated a new visual regime that employed images for the sake of propaganda and within a domestic devotional culture, I still recognize Belting's central point that art history transposed originally religious images into fine art. He didn't intend to settle down as an art historian in this arisen configuration but strove to move out and on. In my reading, his "history of the image before the era of art" is not just about past uses of images in a religious context, but also the beginning of an attempt to recapture dimensions of human-image relations that have been sidelined and lost for analysis in modern art history. Subsequently, he proclaimed the "end of art history" (Belting 1995) and developed, together with scholars as Horst Bredekamp, Gottfried Böhm and Christiane Kruse, an entirely new program for the study of images. His *Bildanthropologie* (Belting 2001, 2011)— anthropology of images– stressed the need to conceptualize images in relation to their makers

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FIG 1
MUSEN- UND MUSEUMSBOTSCHAFTEN, DIE BERLINISCHE BOTSCHAFT, 1996 ff.. owned by the Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Architektur und Fotografie. Copyright work and analog color-fotomontage: Archiv Silvia Klara Breitwieser and VG Bildkunst, 2023. With the use of a foto by Gerhard Haug and the technical support by Harald Naisch.

and users. As a motto coined by Belting that I came across in the city of Berlin in 2012 stated poignantly: "Der Ort der Bilder. Nicht das Museum sondern der Mensch" (The Place of the Images. Not the museum but the human being; this motto was earlier expressed on an artistic postcard depicting Berlin's Kulturforum, see Figure 1). He proposed a compelling idea of material pictures as media which offer a body to the invisible image they evoke and render present to their beholders *via* a process of animation through which these media become harbingers of the presence of what they depict. The desire for media of the invisible and divine was nourished and deployed in Europe's late antique and medieval religious history.

When I encountered Belting's work around 2010, during a stay in Berlin, I was thrilled because it resonated so strongly with my own attempt to re-think religion, beyond the modern "Protestant bias," as a practice of mediation in which images and imagination hold center stage (Meyer 2012). For me, as an anthropologist and Africanist seeking to study religion from a material and corporeal angle, I was keen to develop more expertise in analyzing uses of images in religious settings. Apart from the important work offered by, above all, David Morgan, such expertise was scarce, as the discipline of religious studies still was strongly under the sway of a textual bias, which I take, echoing Belting, as an effect of Reformation theology that discarded the value of the image as a harbinger of presence and privileged the text as prime religious medium. Religious studies, while distinct and distant from Protestant theology and secular in its take on religion, was still indebted to a post-Protestant mentalistic and textual bias towards religion (some pioneering exceptions

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granted, of course) and tended to overlook the profuse visual culture in modern Catholic and Protestant contexts.

Importantly, Belting's work on the genealogy of cultic uses of images and his sophisticated analysis of theological deliberations about the (im)possibility of employing images to represent and render present the divine, as offered in *Likeness and Presence*, did not entail a religionist appraisal of cult images or a cheap celebration of animism. Rather, he identified religion as a domain in which images were rendered active and powerful as media that made the divine present to their makers and beholders. For him, the modern differentiation between art and religion did not imply that the religious past of images was by and gone; it still had repercussions in modern secular human-image relations that were to be spotted through *Bild*-anthropological analysis. In fact, as he put it in his exploration of the deliberations about the "true" image of Jesus, images "have always presumed belief" (Belting 2006, 176; see Meyer 2012, 221). In his big project on Iconic Presence, made possible through the prestigious Balzan prize awarded to him in 2015, Belting sought to relate the history of religious images to modern art history in a systematic manner (http://bildevidenz.de/fellows/hans-belting/). He actively sought to open up a new collaboration with religious studies. My own thinking benefitted tremendously from reading and discussing his work in various settings.

Asked by Victor Stoichita, member of the Balzan prize committee, in a published interview how he envisioned this collaboration, Belting responded:

> Art historians study images within their own history and as the creations of an artist, while historians of religion approach religious images from the view of their place in ritual or cultic practice. The new interest in visual tools that modifies the traditional concept of a spiritual and verbal religion invites an interdisciplinary approach in which the two fields have complementary roles in the study of the same images (Belting and Stoichita 2020, 96).

I very much appreciate the idea of complementary roles and think that such a collaboration, which involves exchange about skills and research foci, should by all means be realized so as to achieve a fuller analysis of images as world-making mediators within, as well as beyond, religious settings. In the interview, Belting explained where he saw potential for further convergences:

> An anthropology of religion, as a new approach in Religious Studies, offers a link to a general kind of iconology that I called The Anthropology of Images in a book which was published in

German in 2001. In early cultures such as those of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the production of living images was divided into two stages. After an artisan had shaped the material form of a statue, it was the job of a priest to consecrate that same statue. It required the so-called 'mouth opening ritual' to bring the artifact to life. Such rituals exemplify the meaning of what we call animation. While they attributed the capacity of real presence to an agency, it is in fact the viewers who project their own lives onto the life of the artifact (Belting and Stoichita 2020, 96–97).

A central common theme, in his view, concerns the notion of presence and in this context he also referred to the work of Matthew Engelke, David Morgan, Robert Orsi and myself. Belting stressed that while pictures were present as material forms, the presence of what is depicted by them—the invisible image that is to be seen—is "a matter of mediation" (Belting and Stoichita 2020, 98). So for him, presence was not experienced in a straightforward and immediate manner, but staged through rituals and other events (as outlined in his essay on Iconic Presence in *Material Religion*, Belting 2016). Obviously, a deeper understanding of the techniques employed in making images to convey an experience of immediate presence in their beholders is well served by exposure to work done in religious studies, while the latter can benefit from the sophisticated image-anthropological analysis offered by Belting, which leads deep into the religious past of images before modernity. Again, the point for him was not a nostalgic return to a religious past, but the development of new trails for conceptualizing and studying images by taking into account resources from "before the era of art" and, I would add, before the era of religious studies. The aim here is not to just get a better grasp of images in religious settings but, more importantly, of the pivotal role of images in practices of world-making beyond the religion-secular divide. Hans Belting leaves us with a highly stimulating corpus of ideas that offer enticing incentives for further interdisciplinary collaboration between religious studies, anthropology and art history. Let's go for it!

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