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**Catholic Eyes and Protestant Ears  
(The Conflict of Visuality and Aurality  
in a Hermeneutical Perspective)**

"And all the people saw the voice"

(Exodus 20: 18, Philo's translation)

"I see a voice!"

(Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

It seems appropriate to me that at a conference on iconography we should devote some discussion to the general and theoretical questions of the nature of images and visuality. The significance of the question is revealed immediately by the mere fact that the word "icon" has so many derivatives expressing diametrically opposed and frequently passionate, even fierce, attitudes to pictures. On the positive side there is the attitude of iconophilia (love of images), iconodulia (veneration of images) and iconolatria (worship of images). On the negative side there is iconomachy (active opposition to images), iconophobia (hatred of images) and iconoclasm (the active attack of images). And with a touch of self-irony we may add that whoever devotes his or her energy to the pursuit of this question can be defined as suffering from iconomania. Undoubtedly, there is prejudice on each side: following Jonas Barish's idea of "anti-theatrical prejudice"<sup>1</sup> Clifford Davidson speaks about "anti-visual prejudice".<sup>2</sup> But if we happen to have more sympathy for the work of Walter Ong<sup>3</sup> or Walter Kelber<sup>4</sup> we may defend the oral and the aural tradition by inventing the term of "anti-aural prejudice".

It cannot be denied that in the religious discourse of the past 2000 years there has frequently been a dramatic tension, or even conflict, between seeing and hearing and this has often been manifested as the ultimate conflict between the "eye" and the "ear". Indeed, the visual and the aural modes are two basic types of religious cognition. David Chidester, in a recent and excellent book on the subject<sup>5</sup>, argues that religion consists of strategies for opening eyes and ears to whatever may be perceived to be sacred."<sup>6</sup> In the following lecture we shall have

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to turn to some concrete, historical examples but our approach is intended to be rather hermeneutical than historical.

We shall confine our investigations to the history of Christianity being aware, however, that confrontations between the image and the word took place not only in Christianity but in Judaism and Islam as well, as Joseph Gutmann has reminded us in his book.<sup>7</sup>

### **A Brief Historical Sketch of the Conflict Between the "Eye" and the "Ear"**

The Hebrew Bible, which Christianity regards as the Old Testament, is undoubtedly iconoclastic in its tone. Prophetic religions have always tended to be iconoclastic. The Israelites passionately and desperately fought against the visually manifested pagan cults of the surrounding heathen people. In Deuteronomy it is the Lord who summons his people to be iconoclasts: "Ye shall utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which ye shall possess serve gods." (Deut. 12). The Decalogue contains the famous second commandment: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" (Exodus 20:4). It is never the picture or the image but the word coming from the "mouth" of God that is able to convert, revive or rejuvenate a people.

In the New Testament the apostle Paul, again, appeals to the ear with his *fides ex auditu*: "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10: 17). The early church fathers, especially Tertullian, passionately attacked the idols of the pagans as well as the adoration of the image of the Emperor. The first Christians, therefore, were seen as atheists in the Roman Empire.

It seems to be evident that the respect for images and symbolism has more to do with the meditative Johannite than with the more argumentative Pauline Christianity. True, however, that the iconophiles, in their debates with the iconoclasts, appealed to Colossians 1:15 where Christ is said to be the *eikon* of God. In Byzantine or Eastern Christianity the veneration of images has developed perhaps as a feature that distinguished Christianity from Judaism or the emerging Islam. The iconoclasts, however, found that the very existence of icons is the great obstacle to converting the Jews and the Muslims. The most famous outbreak of iconoclasm in Byzantine Christianity took place between 726 and 843. As it is well known the long struggle came to an end with the victory of iconophiles.

Without going into historical details let us try to understand the positions of each party. Those who defended the veneration (and not the worship!) of the icons argued that respect for the image is transposed to the archetype, the invisible God. Christ is the true image while human beings are, because of sin, the distorted

images of God. The iconoclasts' position on the other hand, could sound as follows: if the "eye" is too much attached to the images, it becomes dependent on "fixities" whereas God is always different from our fixities: He always challenges, even destroys our images of him. Therefore, if we fail to recognize this unceasing divine activity and continue to respect *our* fixed images of him, we might become the captives of our imagination and thereby the servants of idols. Image, sight or vision are not as trustworthy in the revelation of the sacred as the word that we receive through hearing.

The cult of images and relics in medieval Western Christianity i.e. Roman Catholicism, lacked the sophisticated theology of the Eastern veneration of icons. Pope Gregory, for example, defended the significance of pictures in Christian life. He said the images are introduced in the churches so "that those who are ignorant of letters may at least read by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books."<sup>8</sup> In spite of some local outbursts of an iconoclastic anti-visual prejudice, as for example in Charlemagne's court in the 12th century<sup>9</sup>, the Middle Ages remained consistent in acknowledging the primacy of the eye over the ear. The average believer was meant to be satisfied with the "sight" of *corpus dei* during Eucharist and he or she was less concerned about understanding the word of God. Sermons were homilies and not proclamations of the word. Borrowing a term of Paul Ricoeur (to which we shall later return) we may argue that in the Middle Ages the stress was upon the *manifestation* and not on the *proclamation* of the sacred. There was a more or less unbroken tradition from Philo of Alexandria through Athanasius, Augustine and on to Bonaventura on the primacy of visuality in religion. Eusebius' old notion prevailed throughout the Middle Ages: "the evidence of our eyes makes instruction through the ears unnecessary."<sup>10</sup> Pilgrimages, adoration of relics and images, pomp and grandeur, festivity, the elevation of the host and most other forms of Catholic ritual all appealed to the eye.

The Reformation radically reversed the medieval relationship between the "eye" and of the "ear". The reformers, with their rediscovery of the "word" that comes from the mouth of God, stressed almost exclusively the significance of the divine voice appealing primarily to the ear of the believer. Luther turned Eusebius' dictum the other way round by saying that "the ears are the only organs of the Christian."<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere he said: "A right faith goes right on with its eyes closed; it listens to God's Word; it follows that Word; it believes the Word."<sup>12</sup>

Margaret Miles tells us that the Reformation's emphasis on the primacy of the word in religious education had been anticipated in the fourteenth

century by Meister Eckhart who also recognized the priority of hearing over seeing. Meister Eckhart associated hearing with passivity which makes one able to hear the voice of God. Seeing, on the contrary, makes one's active faculties work. But the problem is that these faculties are themselves sinful. Therefore, passivity and powerlessness are necessary if one is to hear the voice of a totally different being. Meister Eckhart said:

Hearing brings more into a person, but seeing one gives out more, even in the very act of looking. And therefore we shall all be blessed in eternal life by our power to hear than by our power to see. For the power to hear the eternal word is within me and the power to see will leave me; for hearing, I am passive, and seeing I am active. Our blessedness does not depend on the deeds we do but rather on our passiveness to God...God has set our blessedness in passivity.<sup>13</sup>

Luther and the reformers reaffirmed the significance of this passivity in listening to, and hearing, the word of God. Passivity is necessary so that the activity of the word (*extra nos*, beyond our sinful beings) could have its effect. Luther even saw the human language as a response to the word of God and this language, he found, was born when one had pondered in one's heart the word of God. The following aphorism is attributed to Luther: "Do not look for Christ with your eyes, but put your eyes in your ears...The Kingdom of Christ is a hearing Kingdom, not a seeing Kingdom."<sup>14</sup> It was Luther's former colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt who launched a militant, iconoclastic attack on the Catholic churches of Wittenberg. Before doing this he wrote a pamphlet on the abolition of images (*Von Abtuhung der Bilder*). In this pamphlet he admits that he had deeply been attracted to images since childhood: "My heart since childhood has been brought up in the veneration of images, and a harmful fear has entered me which I gladly would rid myself of, and cannot."<sup>15</sup> Karlstadt debates with Pope Gregory and the "Gregorians" (*Gregeristen*) that they granted honor to the images while God granted this honor only to his word. Christ said that his sheep would *hear* his voice (John 10:27), not that they would see his image or that of his saints. He also appeals to the prophet's skeptical question in Habakkuk 2: 19: "Is it possible that it [an image] can teach. "Can this give revelation?" (Revised Standard Version). "The implied answer is obviously no. Then images cannot be considered as books, for books teach."<sup>16</sup> Karlstadt also comments on the uselessness of the veneration

of the crucifix because "crucifixes teach merely how Christ died, not the infinitely more important truth of why he died."<sup>17</sup>

The image-smashing fervor of Karlstadt and his followers devastated the churches of Wittenberg in December 1521 and the iconoclastic outbreaks spread like wildfire to Zwingli's Zurich (June, 1524), to Bucer's Strassburg and to Oecolampadius's Basel.

In England radical Protestant iconoclasm<sup>18</sup> went hand in hand with anti-theatricalism<sup>19</sup> and this was manifested in the Puritans attacks on the Elizabethan theatre. The anti-theatrical Puritan pamphlet-writer Antony Munday also appealed to the idolatrous eye as opposed to the less-wicked ear:

There commeth much evil in at the eares, but more at the eies, by these two open windowes death breaketh into the soul. Nothing entereth in more effectualie into the memorie, than that which commeth by seeing, things heard do lightlie pass awaie, but the tokens of that which wee have seen, saith Petrarch, sticke fast in us whether we will or no.<sup>20</sup>

The great fathers of the Reformation have always held more balanced views than the practising iconoclasts. Luther's views on images, for example, were not so fiercely iconoclastic as those of his radical followers. His attitude was more moderate and more civilized as well. He once said that his own writings had "done more to overthrow images than he (Karlstadt) ever will do with his storming and fanaticism."<sup>21</sup> Luther discussed the subject of images and iconoclasm in the treatise *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*. Here he wrote:

"I approached the task of destroying images by first tearing them out of the heart through God's Word and making them worthless and despised."<sup>22</sup> Luther was convinced that the Karlstadtian manner of iconoclasm was "to make the masses mad and foolish, and secretly to accustom them to revolution."<sup>23</sup> Luther, on the contrary, admitted that his translation of the New Testament contained Cranach's woodcuts of the Apocalypse. As is well-known, he even designed the visual-emblematic symbol of his faith, the so-called "Luther-rose".

At this point we finish our brief historical survey of the struggle between the eye and the ear as the primary means of religious cognition. By turning to the ideas of some extreme radicals we have sharpened the contrast in order to dramatize this confrontation and conflict. With the great figures of the Christian

tradition like Augustine or Luther the significance of the eye or the ear is not an exclusive either/or question, only the emphasis is different.

Chidester writes that by the end of the sixteenth century with the advance of the modern age "Seeing and hearing...became two antithetical, autonomous options for organizing knowledge, no longer two coordinates of a unified perceptual sensibility."<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as Michel Foucault also noted, by the end of the sixteenth century "things and words were to be separated from one another...the eye was thenceforth destined to see and only to see, the ear to hear and only to hear".<sup>25</sup> It has been frequently noticed that with the advance of the modern age "the eye came to dominate the epistemic field of Western European thought."<sup>26</sup> Walter Ong, among others, has recognized that in the new age there was "a shift toward the visual throughout the whole cognitive field."<sup>27</sup>

### **Hermeneutical Conclusions**

After this brief historical sketch we shall attempt to draw some hermeneutical conclusions. First of all, it must be noted that in spite of the implications of the title of this presentation the epistemological conflict between the eye and the ear points far beyond the doctrinal or confessional differences between Catholics and Protestants. A Norwegian scholar, Thorlief Boman in an excellent and much debated book<sup>28</sup> finds that the criterion of truth was different in these cultures: "Because the Greeks were organized in a predominantly visual way and the Hebrews were organized in a predominantly auditory way, each people's conception of truth was formed in increasingly different ways."<sup>29</sup> The Greek were visualizers and their culture was ultimately a spatial one while the verbalizing Hebrew culture was formed exclusively by the word of God. The voice is uttered as a temporal sequence, thus the ultimate reality for the Hebrews was time rather than space. The eye-appealing Greek religion is more contemplative while the ear-appealing Hebrew faith is prophetic. In terms of artistic expressions the eye envisages the pattern which may correspond to the Aristotelian idea of *dianoia* (meaning) and the ear is sensitive to the time sequence of *mythos* that is the story or the narrative. As Northrop Frye has frequently reminded us, pattern (or meaning) and rhythm (or narrative) are two aspects of literary works of art at the level of archetypes. And a literary work of art appeals to the visual (*opsis*, "doodle") as well as to the musical (*melos*, "babble").<sup>30</sup>

I have promised to return to Paul Ricoeur's excellent essay on "Manifestation and Proclamation" which masterfully places the eye and ear debate into a hermeneutical perspective. Beginning with the phenomenology of the manifestation

of the sacred, Ricoeur discusses Rudolf Otto's and Mircea Eliade's ideas of the sacred and of the numinous. For Eliade, the phenomenology of the sacred is possible because the sacred *manifests* itself in rocks and trees that the believer generates. However, Ricoeur finds that Eliade has not stressed enough the difference between the idea of the sacred in pagan religions and that of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The difference, for Ricoeur, lies between manifestation and proclamation. Therefore, after the phenomenology of manifestation Ricoeur goes on to discuss the hermeneutics of proclamation. "With the Hebraic faith the word outweighs the numinous. Of course the numinous is not absent from, say, the burning bush or the revelation at Sinai. But the numinous is just the underlying canvas from which the word detaches itself. The emergence of the word from the numinous is ... the primordial trait that rules all the other differences between the two poles of the religious."<sup>31</sup> Israel's theology is organized around certain fundamental discourses like the Torah, prophecy, the story, hymnic, wisdom or apocalyptic discourse. The speeches in the Hebrew Bible as well as the most typical forms of discourse Jesus used like the parable, the proverb or the eschatological sayings were meant to uproot the audience, namely, to disorient in order to reorient. "One does not become a disciple. . . without uprooting oneself"<sup>32</sup>

In his final conclusion Ricoeur argues that manifestation and proclamation should not be mutually exclusive. The iconoclastic approaches are usually exclusive. Modern culture adopted an iconoclastic discourse when it banished the sphere of the sacred into the realm of unreality. In Christianity the loss of the sacred is particularly noticeable in modern Protestantism, especially in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's idea of a "religionless religion". The loss of the sacred and the idea of manifestation necessarily leads to the impoverishment of religion. True, says Ricoeur, "there would be no hermeneutic if there were no proclamation. But there would be no proclamation if the word, too, were not powerful; that is, if it did not have the power to set forth the new being it proclaims."<sup>33</sup> The word and manifestation, that is: the eye and the ear are reconciled in the prologue of St. John's Gospel: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory..." "In this way -says Ricoeur- the manifestation of the sacred is dialectically reaffirmed and internalized into proclamation."<sup>34</sup> The eye-appealing ancients and archaic symbols of the sacred like the city or the temple, the *axis mundi* and so on, are not abolished but dramatically inverted, reoriented. There is the New Zion, the New Jerusalem and the Golgotha becomes the new *axis mundi*.

Ancient symbols, and we may add this to Ricoeur, are *fulfilled* with the new proclamation.<sup>35</sup>

And there is one last thing that reconciles the age old tension and dramatic conflict of the eye and the ear. In his recent book on the iconicity of Old Russian culture, Valerij Lepahin<sup>36</sup> writes an excellent chapter on the idea of *hesychasm* or “the living icon”. Its notion implies that human beings were originally created in the image or “icon” of God but they lost this image with the fall. However, due to Christ’s sacrifice, that is through the image or the icon of Christ, their human icon can also be purified and the original divine icon can be restored in them. Thereby human beings may become “living icons”, themselves radiating the glory of God. Now, after reading Lepahin’s thoughts on the subject, I immediately associated this notion of the “living icon” with Luther’s famous idea of *viva vox evangelii*, the “living voice” of the Gospel. Luther emphasized several times that if the empty and dead words are filled with the spirit through God’s initiative, they will come to life, thereby gaining special power that is able to regenerate the hearers and create beings anew. And this is our final conclusion, namely that the notions of the “living icon” and of the “living voice” reconcile the tension between manifestation and proclamation, the age-old conflict between the senses of the eye and the ear which, in their long, desperate struggle and mutual exclusion, have frequently been, perhaps, only blind and deaf.

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## Appendix

<i>Religious and Symbolic Cognition</i>	
EYE	EAR
SEEING	HEARING
LIGHT	VOICE
VISUALITY	AURALITY
VISUALIZERS	VERBALIZERS
IMAGE	WORD
ICONOCENTRIC	LOGOCENTRIC
SPACE	TIME
GREEK	HEBREW
CATHOLIC	PROTESTANT
CONTEMPLATION	PROPHECY
PATTERN (MEANING)	RHYTHM (NARRATIVE)
<i>OPSIS</i>	<i>MELOS</i>
<i>PICTURA</i>	<i>SCRIPTURA</i>
EMBLEM	
PLAY	PULPIT
STAGE	PAGE
THEATRE	
SPECTACLE: sight, show, theatricality, pomp, relics, pilgrimage, cult	ANTI-SPECTACLE: textuality "invisible reality"
Extreme: ICONOLATRY	Extreme: LOGOLATRY, BIBLIOLATRY
MANIFESTATION	PROCLAMATION
"LIVING ICON" "LIVING VOICE"	

Notes

1. Jonas Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1981.
2. Clifford Davidson, 1989. "The Anti-Visual Prejudice", in *Iconoclasm Vs. Art and Drama* (ed. Clifford Davidson and Ann Eljenhom Nichols). Early Drama, Art and Music Monograph Series 11, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989.
3. Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word. Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*. New Haven Connecticut and London: Yale University Press, 1982. *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York: Methuen, 1967
4. Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.
5. David Chidester, *Word and Light, Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992.
6. *Ibid.*, IX
7. Joseph Gutmann (ed.), *The Image and the Word: Confrontations in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977.
8. John Graham, "Ut Pictura Poesis", *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1973, Vol. IV, p. 466
9. Anthony Ugolnik, "The *Libri Carolini*: Antecedents of Reformation Iconoclasm", in *Iconoclasm Vs. Art and Drama* (eds. Clifford Davidson and Ann Eljenholm Nichols). Early Drama, Art and Music Monograph Series 11. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1988, p. 1-32.
10. Quoted in Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985, p. 41
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p.152
13. *Ibid.*, p. 101
14. Quoted in Ernest B. Gilman, *Iconoclasm and Poetry in the English Reformation. Down Went Dagon*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1986, p. 36
15. Quoted in Carl C. Christensen, *Art and Reformation in Germany*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1979, p. 25
16. *Ibid.*, p. 33
17. *Ibid.*

18. Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts: Law Against Images*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986; John Phillips, *The Reformation of Images: Destruction of Art in England, 1535-1660*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: London University of California Press, 1973.
19. Barish, op. cit.
20. Quoted in Michael O'Connell, "The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm Anti-Theatricalism, and the Image of the Elizabethan Theater", *ELH* 52 (1985), p. 282
21. Quoted in Christensen, op cit., p. 42
22. *Ibid.*, p. 45
23. *Ibid.*, p. 49
24. Chidester, op. cit., p. 134
25. *Ibid.*, p. 132
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*. London: SCM Press, 1960.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 206
30. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957.
31. Paul Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation" *Journal of the Blaisdell Institute* XII.1 (1978), p. 21
32. *Ibid.*, p. 23
33. *Ibid.*, p. 32
34. *Ibid.*, p. 33
35. Fabiny, Tibor, *The Lion and the Lamb. Figuralism and Fulfilment in the Bible, Art and Literature*. Macmillan, 1992, p. 20-26
36. Valerij Lepahin, *Az óorosz kultúra ikonarcúsága*. [The Iconicity of Old Russian Culture] Szeged: József Attila Tudományegyetem, Szláv Filológiai Tanszék, 1992, p. 48-57