

## Article

# Modern Christianity, Part of the Cultural Wars. The Challenge of a Visual Culture

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**Abstract:** The article focuses on the changing landscape of modern Christianity. It does so by analysing the use of the notion of image in early Christianity and in later eras. It appears that Christianity created an ambiguous concept of the notion of image, reducing it in the end to a void image. This development caused a separation between theology and culture. It is a separation which eventually led to a Christianity that is hostile to modern culture and seeks only to reinforce its own identity.

**Keywords:** image; culture; identity; nominalism

## 1. The Still-Changing Landscape of Religion

Looking at the situation of religion in Europe, the actual landscape is rapidly changing and difficult to picture in a concise way.<sup>1</sup> Different perspectives remain contradictory and are not really compatible. These different views are fiercely debated, yet they do not result in a real consensus on the nature of the landscape we are living in. One of the most controversial issues remains the narrative of secularization, which has long been contested in many ways. On the one hand, institutionalized Christianity is still decreasing and deconfessionalization is an ongoing process that is there to stay.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, indeed *disenchantment*, though understood in a different way than was the case with Max Weber,<sup>3</sup> is and will be the keyword.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, religion seems to transform itself and can no longer be identified with the structures we were accustomed to. Moreover, religion has made a kind of comeback,<sup>5</sup> yet *alia et aliter*; we cannot speak of a return of the religion.<sup>6</sup> This contradictory phenomenon gave rise to different interpretations, ranging from authors sharing the view of Marcel

<sup>1</sup> One of the fascinating features developing in the U.S. is the overwhelming growth of Independent Christian Groups. Cp. (Christerson and Flory 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Cp. (van Rooden 2010, pp. 121–34).

<sup>3</sup> Cp. François A. Isambert (1986, pp. 83–103), who writes: ‘Il résulte de là que l’enchantement, l’ensorcellement du monde avait besoin d’être rompu par cette prise de conscience. L’Entzauberung change de signe. Il est perte, certes, mais perte d’illusion. Les grandes religions ont chacune à leur manière désensorcelé le monde et c’est pourquoi l’option pour chacune d’elles reste légitime, à la condition que le choix soit parfaitement informé et que l’adepte sache en particulier que l’acte fondamental qu’il sera amené à faire et qui donnera sens à sa vie est le sacrifice de l’intellect. Mais à celui qui fait l’option inverse est proposé la méta-éthique du courage intellectuel et de l’esprit de responsabilité qui peuvent animer la synthèse de la science et de la politique (p. 100). This may a kind of binary we no longer think acceptable, yet it clearly shows the way ‘disenchantment’ has changed since the times of Weber.

<sup>4</sup> Cp. (Gauchet [1985] 2005). Gauchet reworks in this classic the thesis of Max Weber on *Entzauberung*. In the actual debate on secularity and secularization (see note 6), the notion of *disenchantment* is also rejected. Cp. (Brown 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Cp. (Sharpe and Nickelson 2014).

<sup>6</sup> A return would imply a kind of renaissance of what was still present and returns in essentially the same form. It is rightly the issue of form and content that is difficult to compare to older forms of religion, in particular the confessional and institutional forms we know best in Western society.

Gauchet<sup>7</sup> to Taylor,<sup>8</sup> including the still highly important debates between Löwith and Blumenberg.<sup>9</sup> The main point remains the question of whether indeed our secularized era represents a new epoch in which religion no longer plays a decisive role. Or is our time still a long-term period in which these traditional religious structures still survive, though of course bearing new names?<sup>10</sup> Is it, so to say, a matter of supersessionism or is it indeed the ‘departure of religion’ as characterization of the disenchantment of the world?<sup>11</sup> The question is still open but, meanwhile, developments continue and we do observe many a phenomenon in which religion, be it in its traditional form, be it in a more modern form that has adopted the rules of modern politics,<sup>12</sup> plays an important role. There is a new battle over values, often considered to be Christian.<sup>13</sup> There is also a battle over identity, there is a battle about ethics, a battle about sexuality. In short, we are confronted with cultural wars and, in all these issues, religion is indeed paramount. Governments, while of course respecting the separation between church and state, try to find new ways of dealing with religion.<sup>14</sup> The same goes for the churches, which are fiercely trying to establish new relations with society. However, these new relations are far from clear-cut. Churches are deeply divided on matters such as sexuality, gender, and the relation with Islam, and in many churches the influence of a hardening orthodoxy is felt. To sum up, the religious landscape is indeed far from easy to understand and interpret. However, looking at the roots of these phenomena, at their history and their birth, most scholars seem to agree that the period of nominalism is an important one and that the Reformation has played a decisive role in the dynamics we still call ‘secularization.’ In this article, I therefore intend to focus on a particular aspect of religion, which is the relation between religion and identity, leading to a specific interpretation of the notion of image. I will discuss, too, how the theology of image still contributes to the changing landscape of religion. I shall limit myself to the Christian context, remaining thus within the framework of the main studies on secularization.

## 2. Christian Identity as a Conviction

When Christianity came into existence, it developed a distinctiveness that only gradually developed itself into an ‘identity.’<sup>15</sup> Though Harnack stated that there was a kind of original and essential belief that created the Christian identity from its earliest days, modern research has long since abandoned this thesis. Harnack’s vision was an interpretation of early Christianity according to which certain characteristics created Christianity’s essential identity, namely the idea of the coming of the kingdom

<sup>7</sup> Regarding Gauchet, see (Cloots [2015] 2016, pp. 47–66).

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the history of the narrative of secularization, see (Vanheeswijck 2009, pp. 3–26). See also (McKenzie 2017, pp. 3–28). An alternative is proposed by (Steinvorth 2017). See also (P. Harrison 2017; Pollack 2014). A particularly interesting view is to be found in (Donegani 2015). The same goes also for the position of Vatimo; cp. (Harris 2017). Hence, authors such as Ian Hunter maintain that secularization versus religion are concepts used by rival cultural-political factions which in a way can be seen as the continuation of older cultural wars. Cp. (Hunter 2015, 2017). This is a vision which we also come across in Talal Assad, who defines secularization as a concept that is far from neutral but as a governing structure. Cp. (Assad 2003). An overview of the debate between Assad and Casanova can be found in Sorin Gog, *After-life, Politics and Religious Governmentalisation: A Critique of the Post-Structuralist Theory*, in (Sxchüler 2016, pp. 127–44).

<sup>9</sup> Cp. (Fincke 1985, pp. 127–52). Regarding Blumenberg, cp. (Kirke 2019). See also (Kervégan 2007, pp. 107–17).

<sup>10</sup> Cp. Enda McCaffrey (2009), who contends that the French State has replaced the Church and is in fact ‘the creation of a civic theocracy.’

<sup>11</sup> A beautiful book defending this point of view is of course Gregory (2012).

<sup>12</sup> A good example of this new form is the French movement *La manif pour tous*, that can be identified with the larger part of traditional French catholic currents. Cp. (Béraud and Portier 2015).

<sup>13</sup> A clear example of this battle was the debate on a reference to the Christian tradition on the preamble of the European Constitution. Since then, the term ‘judeo-christianity’ has gained a certain importance, in particular in right wing politics. Cp. (Topolski 2016, pp. 267–84; Teixidor 2006).

<sup>14</sup> The French President Macron recently stated expressively that he wanted to reestablish the relation with the churches. Moreover, he has also proposed that the law on the separation between church and state, of 1905, be revised: lecture of 9 April 2018, at the *Collège des Bernardins*, Paris, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> One of the best introductions to the question of early Christian identity is Lieu (2002; 2017, pp. 294–308). See also Christoph Markschies, who considers early Christianity as one of the products on the spiritual marketplace of Antiquity. Cp. (Markschies 2007). For an approach taking a closer look at the Jewish side of the story of the development of Christian Identity, see (Mimouni 2010).

of God,<sup>16</sup> the notion of ethics based on love and, finally, the notion of an eternal soul that learned that we are all children of God the Father.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, this original Christianity would have lost its soul once it started to merge with Hellenism, in particular Greek philosophy. This influence spoiled a good deal of the original Christianity and it was only centuries later that the Reformation was able to redress the situation and return to the essentials of Christianity. However, the notion of such essentials implied the notion of orthodoxy as a normative framework and this idea gave birth to the idea that, chronologically speaking, there was initially orthodoxy and that it was only afterwards that heterodoxy produced itself, taking the form of heresy. This idea was challenged by W. Bauer,<sup>18</sup> who held that heterodoxy was the starting point of the early church, and that it was this diversity that prompted the church to develop orthodoxy by proclaiming the canon, the creeds and the structure of the church. Though Bauer's thesis was contested, it had a great influence and made it clear that the essentialist view was no longer acceptable. What became evident was that early Christianity remained for a long time tainted by a plurality of currents.<sup>19</sup> Yet, these general traits do not represent our main interest. What is striking, in fact, is that Harnack, when he speaks about the fact that the soul has an eternal life and that it has the Father as its origin, does not refer to the notion of *image*. He nowhere refers to Genesis where humans are said to be made in the image of God and hence can be said to be His children. What he writes indeed is: *'Wer zu dem Wesen, das Himmel und Erde regiert, mein Vater sagen darf, der ist damit über Himmel und Erde erhoben, und hat selbst einen Wert der höher ist als das Gefüge der Welt.'*<sup>20</sup> He focuses on the New Testament and, in his essentialist view, the notion of man as the image of God played no role. He does not consider it to be part of the core identity of a Christian. What belonged to the Christian identity, on the contrary, were convictions and doctrines, not something that was given by nature, a quality bestowed by God. Therefore, what we can observe in this essentialist approach is that it defines the right opinions and convictions as the purest base of one's identity. Indeed, Harnack saw in 19th-century German Protestantism something akin to the original Christian identity as it was before it became 'spoiled' by Hellenism.

### 3. Christian Identity as Anthropology

Hence, important aspects, such as the anthropology developed in early Christianity, were not brought to the fore and were left aside. However, the notion of man being created in the image of God was of paramount importance. This notion was already present in the letters of Saint Paul, as George H. van Kooten largely demonstrated,<sup>21</sup> but it only became a highly relevant aspect once the doctrine of the Trinity had been fully developed. The Cappadocean Fathers and Greek Orthodoxy<sup>22</sup> insisted on Christian anthropology as a doctrine holding that mankind is created in the image and likeness of God, a concept that led to the idea of deification.<sup>23</sup> Theologians such as Clement<sup>24</sup> and Chrysostom<sup>25</sup> were convinced that man, even after the Fall, is still in the possession of a free will and the ability to reach out to deification. Based on the fact that humans are created by God in His image, there had to be a possibility to become like God and to grasp, in some way, the divine reality. Of course, this

<sup>16</sup> The insistence on this eschatological element can still be found in Paula Frederiksen (2018), who states that this expectation of the end of times belongs in particular to the first generations of Christians.

<sup>17</sup> (von Harnack 1902). Harnack quotes in his first chapter the three characteristics as follows: *Das Reich Gottes und sein Kommen; Gott der Vater und der unendliche Wert der Menschenseele; Die bessere Gerechtigkeit und das Gebot der Liebe* (p. 33). The title reveals already an essentialist approach. Regarding the modern reception of Harnack, see (Markschies 2012).

<sup>18</sup> (Bauer [1971] 1934). For a critical discussion on the Bauer thesis, see (Hartog 2015). Cp. (Mimouni 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Cp. (Markschies 2007).

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.* 43.

<sup>21</sup> (van Kooten 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Cp. (N.V. Harrison 2009, pp. 78–92).

<sup>23</sup> On deification in the Eastern tradition, see Norman Russell (2004), who nevertheless insists on this difference. Partly the same goes for Stephen Thomas (2007). Regarding the Western tradition, see (Smalbrugge 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Cp. (Gibbons 2017, in particular the last chapter 'Clements' idiosyncratic concept of autonomy in the context of ancient thought, pp. 131–66; Karavites 1999).

<sup>25</sup> (de Wet 2017).

could only be a partial grasping and hence the notion of participation became important. Nevertheless, this anthropology was an optimistic one. It was influenced by Plato, Neoplatonism, and the ideas of Origen, and it pictured the relation between God and humans as a relation that was not between equals, but that certainly was far from describing an essential incompatibility between God and humans. Anthropology became, thanks to the influence of Hellenism, a concept that allowed humans to look at the divine light, which made Christianity a religion that was not defined by certain convictions and creeds but by an anthropology. This insistence on the anthropology within the framework of the doctrine of the Trinity continued in the West, and Augustine in particular made this doctrine of humans as the image of God one of the hallmarks of his theology. Yet, it is also with Augustine that the notion of the image becomes characterized by a real ambiguity. His theology marks a shift in which the optimism of the Eastern Fathers disappears and his prolonged controversy with the Pelagians can also be considered as the battle over a certain anthropology. It is to this ambiguity that Augustine has introduced that we shall turn now. From there on, the ideas of the nominalists will loom. Their ideas will subsequently determine some of the characteristics of the transformation Christian religion undergoes in the actual era. Surprisingly, we will see that the intuitions of Harnack are about to return. Perhaps not his ideas as such on what the essence of Christianity was, but the mere fact that Christian religion becomes, once again, defined in terms of an identity having specific characteristics. It is the return of essentialism in the form of an identity policy that is at odds with the idea of Christianity expressing a certain anthropology common to all humans. This is no longer the case. Is it not true that once one takes a closer look at modern Christianity, one will be struck by the fact that orthodoxy is increasingly prevailing, and that it is this orthodoxy in particular that has changed the idea of a rich and fulfilling anthropology into the notion of humans as void images? Images, furthermore, that are no longer capable of reflecting a divine presence, and that have lost their relation with the original of which they are an image. So, let us see what Augustine tells us about the image.

#### 4. Augustine and His Ambiguity in an Earlier Phase

Augustine dwells widely on the notion of image and he does so in particular within the framework of the Trinitarian doctrine. However, he started his main work on the Trinity only in 405, when he had already studied the notion of image in detail in his earlier works. What were his main ideas on image before he started with the *De Trinitate*? Already in his early works, to begin with the *Soliloquia*,<sup>26</sup> Augustine conceives the image as the imprint of the divine on the human being. Man has been created, in biblical terms, in the image of God, which means that humans bear this image in their being; it is part of them in the most substantial way. In their groundbreaking research, Gerald Boersma on the one hand, and Laela Zwollo on the other, have pointed out that Augustine mainly follows the Plotinian schedule of an image. In this philosophy, image is a reality which of course is different from the highest being as well as inferior to it, whilst nevertheless remaining irresistibly attracted to this highest being.<sup>27</sup> In Plotinus' view, then, there is a moment when the image will strive for a unity, a reunion, with the original. This endeavour is indeed the desire for a reunion, a return to the origin. Boersma subsequently explains that, though the image strives for a reunion, a conversion so to say, and though it is capable of doing so in the opinion of Plotinus, Augustine does not share this optimistic view. On the contrary, in his view the image is not capable of realizing this return by its own forces. It needs the help of the divine grace, and it is this aspect in particular which comes down to stating that a conversion to God is only possible thanks to God. Hence, it is: to God by God. It cannot be: to God thanks to the fact that humans are made in His image. Therefore, it is here then that we have the parting of the ways. The image is no longer the way to the original; it is the vestige of an original that can no longer be attained. The question, however, is why in fact did Augustine turn to a different idea on the

<sup>26</sup> Sol. I,1,4: *Qui fecisti hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem tuam, quod qui se ipse novit agnoscit.*

<sup>27</sup> (Boersma 2016, 2014; Zwollo 2019). See also (Colin 2016, in particular chp. III, Image et participation, pp. 173–87).

capacities of the image than the vision he held in an earlier phase? Probably because he was strongly aware of the fact that an image is not only something that is inferior to the highest being, but that is also partially a false image.<sup>28</sup> It is a similitude, and a similitude always represents something true and something false. The reason for this defective character is the fact that an image is characterized by having a certain resemblance and likeness to the original. Yet, likeness implies that the image is partially true, and partially not. While an image is partially false, it definitely is not able to overcome its own defective nature by its own capacities; it can only do so thanks to a conversion. Yet, a conversion implied for Augustine the help and assistance of the highest being Himself: God. To conclude, an image represents a certain similitude and hence it has no other possibilities than being true and false at the same time. It shows simultaneously a certain presence and an absence,<sup>29</sup> which made Augustine think that the image was not capable of uniting itself with the highest being on the strength of its own forces and qualities. Yet, this argument only concerns the ontological aspect, which we come across in the *Soliloquia*. Included in this ontological approach is the perspective that images mostly concern the empirical world, which is the contrary of the spiritual world we encounter in the divine. Images represent mostly a literal and visible reality which, in itself, is perhaps not physical or visible. This leads to an ontological inferiority of the image, which will become the first step towards a certain ambiguity of the image. This physical and visible aspect of images is mentioned by Augustine when he speaks about the images one sees in one's dreams and which concern a very concrete reality.<sup>30</sup> He also refers to it with regard to the human memory, on which he dwells in Book X of the *Confessiones*.<sup>31</sup> Memories, of course, are mostly images of things we have once lived and seen and which we therefore have to consider as physical realities.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, these images represent an ontological inferiority. However, what is really different and new compared to Plotinus is the fact that, to Augustine, images not only represent an ontological inferiority, but also a moral one. Already in *De Vera Religione*, as was shown by Gerald Boersma, Augustine insists on this moral inferiority of the image, and he continues to do so in the *Confessiones*. He rather bluntly states that humans transform the glory of God into the glory of the corruptible image of God.<sup>33</sup> The only possibility, then, to overcome this double inferiority is through the grace of God. Humans have to be reborn thanks to this divine grace.<sup>34</sup>

## 5. Augustinian Ambiguity in a Later Phase

So, these are the basic lines of his argumentation, which Augustine already developed before starting the *De Trinitate*. He bases himself on the Plotinian idea of the image, but he breaks away from this neoplatonic concept by insisting on the fact that the image is not capable of returning to God thanks to its own forces. It can only be unified with God if grace intervenes and it is only by grace that God can be attained. Secondly, the inferiority of the image is defined in an ontological and moral

<sup>28</sup> Cp. Sol. II,10,18: *unde vera pictura esset, si falsus equus non esset? unde in speculo vera hominis imago, si non falsus homo?* This example clearly shows that indeed the image must be false compared to the original, though even the opposite may be true: the picture of a horse can be true, still it is not a real horse.

<sup>29</sup> Cp. (Bochet 2009, pp. 249–69).

<sup>30</sup> Sol II,14,25: *Quam tibi sordidus, quam foedus, quam execrabilis, quam horribilis complexus femineus videbatur, quando inter nos de uxoris cupiditate quaesitum est! Certe ista nocte vigilantes, cum rursus eadem nobiscum ageremus, sensisti quam te aliter quam praesumpseras, imaginatae illae blanditiae et amara suavitas titillaverit; longe quidem longe minus quam solet, sed item longe aliter quam putaveras; ut sic tibi secretissimus ille medicus utrumque demonstraret, et unde cura eius evaseris, et quid curandum remaneat.*

<sup>31</sup> Cp. (Smalbrugge 2013, pp. 1–11).

<sup>32</sup> Conf X,8,13: *Nec ipsa (sc. Omnia, i.e. impressions of the five senses) tamen intrans, sed rerum sensarum imagines illic praesto sunt cogitationi reminiscendi eas.*

<sup>33</sup> Conf. V,3,5: *Et multa vera de creatura dicunt et veritatem, creaturae artificem, non pie quaerunt et ideo non inveniunt, aut si inveniunt, cognoscentes Deum non sicut Deum honorant aut gratias agunt et evanescent in cogitationibus suis et dicunt se esse sapientes sibi tribuendo quae tua sunt, ac per hoc student perversissima caecitate etiam tibi tribuere quae sua sunt, mendacia scilicet in te conferentes, qui veritas es, et immutantes gloriam incorrupti Dei in similitudinem imaginis corruptibilis hominis et volucrum et quadrupedum et serpentium, et convertunt veritatem tuam in mendacium et colunt et serviunt creaturae potius quam Creatori.*

<sup>34</sup> Conf. VI,3,4: *Et eum quidem in populo verbum veritatis recte tractantem omni die dominico audiebam, et magis magisque mihi confirmabatur omnes versutarum calumniarum nodos, quos illi deceptores nostri adversus divinos Libros innectebant, posse dissolvi. Ubi vero etiam comperi ad imaginem tuam hominem a te factum ab spiritalibus filiis tuis, quos de matre catholica per gratiam regenerasti.*



way. Once again, all this comes down to the idea that an image always has an ambivalent character. It reflects a reality and, in this respect, it certainly has its positive qualities. Being a reflection, it is part of the reality it reflects, and it cannot be separated from it. At the same time, however, there is this ontological and moral inferiority which also belongs to the image and that reveals its negative qualities. It is a contrast we come across in the concept of humans that are created *in* the image of God without being the image *of* God. Would they be the image of God, there would exist the possibility of an equality between the image and its divine origin, as in the case of the Father and the Son. Indeed, they do share a substantial equality, which is inconceivable in the case of the relation between humans and God. Following this trail, Augustine will continue to develop his ideas on image in the *De Trinitate*. The twofold character of the image remains strongly present, yet there is still another element added. That is the element of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge teaches us that we cannot know ourselves without knowing God, and this awareness starts with the idea that we are created in the image of God. If we have been created in the image of God, we certainly have to understand this to mean we have been created in the image of the Trinity. How, then, does this trinitarian approach further our understanding of the image? Two examples seem to be the most important to Augustine, namely love and memory. One who loves will realize that love always includes someone else. Even if one loves oneself, there remains this triad of the lover, the beloved and the love by which they are bound together. Yet, such an appraisal is only possible if we understand the nature of the Trinity and its dynamics. Understanding the nature of the Trinity, however, also implies that we have to acknowledge that being created in the image of God means being created in the image of the Trinity. So, the example of love allows us to attain some sort of self-knowledge, but this self-knowledge cannot be separated from the knowledge of the divine. The same goes for our memory. If I remember something, it cannot be something other than my own memories.<sup>35</sup> Then again, there is the one who remembers and there is also his memory, as well as the relation between memory and the one who remembers. Moreover, if I have a closer look at these memories, they represent not only my memories; they also represent the memory of the divine.

This leads to the conclusion that the image has not only an ontological and moral status, but that it also functions as a knowledge tool. Both aspects—the ontological and the moral—stress the incarnational aspect of this doctrine. It allows us to know God, thanks to the fact that I can know myself; but this knowing myself comes down to realizing that there is a trinitarian image in my soul. Self-knowledge and knowledge of God cannot be disentangled. Nevertheless, even when I have come to know God, and in that sense have returned to God, there still will be this ontological inferiority. The same goes for the moral aspect. Augustine repeatedly insists in the *De Trinitate* on the fact that the soul, after the Fall, is morally corrupted and that this is due to its own cupidity.<sup>36</sup> This cupidity engenders the fact that the soul identifies itself with physical images by a mere fascination and perverted love for these physical images.<sup>37</sup> So, what we have in the end is the same picture as we had in the early works of Augustine. The image has a twofold character: it relates us substantially to God, but at the same time it breaks down this substantial relation. Moreover, this substantial inferiority cannot be overcome, at least not by humans themselves; there is a substantial need for grace. Put differently, the image suffers from defects that can only be traced back to the Fall and which, up to a certain extent, reduce it to a void image. It can no longer accomplish its role as the inner reference to that from which it originates, and it suffers from a serious ambiguity. On the one hand, it is the proof of the divine presence in human existence, the ultimate reference to the highest One. On the other hand, it is the proof of the impossibility, due to the Fall, of being present with and in the divine. It has become a void image unless divine grace restores and reforms it, which is quite a tragic conclusion, given that the image was meant to be the reference to the original and hence had a very positive meaning. How

<sup>35</sup> *De Trin.* IX,2,2; X,3,5.

<sup>36</sup> *De Trin.* IX,5,7: *Multa enim per cupiditatem prauam, tanquam sui sit oblita, sic agit.*

<sup>37</sup> *De Trin.* X,6,8: *Errat autem mens, cum si istis imaginibus tanto amore conjugit.*

was this tradition then handed over to the Middle Ages, in particular to nominalism, and how did the nominalists interpret this ambiguity?<sup>38</sup>

## 6. Ockham and the Lost Referential Character of the Image

We will deal with this topic by exclusively focusing on William of Ockham,<sup>39</sup> Ockham being the sharpest theologian of his time, up to a point where things become poignant. He delves into this matter in his *Ord. dist. II, q 10*, which is dedicated to the question of imprints and images. Yet, before entering into this matter, we should realize that Ockham distinguished between two kinds of knowledge: intuitive and abstract. The latter, however, cannot be reached without first having had some intuitive knowledge. You cannot recognize a tree as a tree if you have never seen a tree, and if you want to obtain abstract knowledge of something new, you will have to memorize what you have seen before in order to grasp this abstract knowledge. Someone who has never seen Hercules will not recognize a statue of this hero.<sup>40</sup> Yet, even this abstract knowledge has to be preceded by intuitive knowledge. This being said, a question remains: is there any difference between *imago* and *vestigium*? Indeed, there is. Vestiges are traces that are always caused by that of which they are a vestige, whereas this does not apply to images.<sup>41</sup> We can think of an image of Hercules that has not been produced by Hercules himself, but by a sculptor. This does not apply to vestiges; the imprint of a hoof cannot be made by anything other than the hoof itself. This differentiation seems to be a positive point of departure, with images possibly originating from something other than that of which they are an image. This makes the notion of image a far more complex one than the notion of vestige. Image can have a wider sense and does not refer to the original in the same way as vestige does. It is rightly this broader sense that raises some questions. Is it true, e.g., that humans possess a trustful image of God? Do they refer to the highest being? Or can we humans create these images ourselves? At first glance, Ockham seemingly adopts an optimistic tone of voice: there must be something that God and humans have in common, if indeed these humans have been created in the image of God. The incarnational aspect seems to be preserved. Yet, the expression ‘in common’ does not really fit this relation. Ockham returns to the old Augustinian idea of a similitude. Of course, there must be something that applies to God and to humans, otherwise the latter would not be called the image of God. So indeed, there must be a similitude between humans and God.<sup>42</sup> At this point, however, the analogy between Augustine and Ockham ends. Whereas Augustine is worried about the aspects of true and false and says that one has to look at a false Hector in the theatre in order to know the real one, Ockham is much more occupied by the fact that all these similitudes remain concepts. A concept can be true; it can even be univocally true when applied to God and to humans; but it is not the reality we are looking for. Speaking about the ultimate divine reality, we have to admit that we cannot know who God is: *nihil est commune univocum deo et cuicumque naturae*.<sup>43</sup> There is a kind of scepticism regarding our reason that obliges him to conclude that reality itself, time and again, concerns only the individual reality. Hence, when we try to relate one reality to another, we can only refer to concepts, realizing that we cannot grasp the reality behind them.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, speaking about similitudes, we can only stick to the level of concepts. Moreover, even these concepts will not satisfy us entirely. For example,

<sup>38</sup> Cp. (Boulnois 2009, pp. 271–92).

<sup>39</sup> See, as introduction to the complex thoughts of Ockham, (Normore 2012, 25p.).

<sup>40</sup> *Ord. I, dist 3, q. 9: Per experientiam enim patet quod si aliquis nullam penitus habet cognitionem de Hercule, si videat statuam Herculis non plus cogitabit de Hercule quam de Sorte.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.: Sed differunt vestigium et imago quia de ratione vestigii est quod sit causatum ab illo cuius est vestigium ... de ratione autem imaginis non est quod sit causata ab illo cuius est imago, sicut imago Herculis sufficit quod causetur ab alio quam ab Hercule. Q 9: imago autem quia non est necessario causata ab illo cuius est imago.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.: illa creatura maxime proprie dicitur imago dei quae habet aliquid deo simillimum.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Cp *Ord.*, dist 2, q. 9: *Dico quod conceptus univocus uno modo potest intelligi distingui contra conceptum proprium, alio modo potest intellegui distingui contra conceptum denominativum.* Ockham here clearly speaks about concepts!

speaking about God, we cannot find a reason why His unity gave birth to a Trinity.<sup>45</sup> It is only because the Scripture tells us to believe so.<sup>46</sup> So, if we stay within the framework of the similitude, what then can be the characteristics God and humans have in common? In Ockham's view, these characteristics do indeed refer to God's qualities, but, at the same time, they do not allow us to know God's essence. Think of notions such as *beauty*, *goodness*, and *truth*, or of qualities such as *mercy*, *justice*, and *wisdom*.<sup>47</sup> They certainly belong to God, but at the same time they cannot be identified with God's essence. It is even more complicated than this matter of concepts. As long as our arguments follow the lines of a similitude, it has to be true that this similitude only concerns the accidental traits of both the image and the original. A statue of Hercules can have the same proportions as Hercules, the same haircut, even the same colour. So there is a similitude, but all these characteristics do not allow us to identify the statue with Hercules himself. Hence, we have to conclude that, substantially speaking, an image and the original must be different. They do not share the same substance; they only share accidental common features. Therefore, what really makes them independent beings is indeed the fact they do not share their substance; there is only the similitude, based on accidental common features. Yet, in God there are no accidents. The solution then must be, once again, that we are only speaking about a concept of God; we cannot speak about His substance, about His being as something other than all other beings, though we cannot speak of Him in anything other than the terms of 'being.' Moreover, as we have already mentioned, Ockham states that all knowledge must be based on intuitive knowledge. This means that knowledge is based on certain memory. That is the function of the image: to lead towards the memory of that of which it is an image.<sup>48</sup> This memory must have an empirical base. Yet, of God there cannot be such a memory. What we are 'remembering' is only the range of qualities that can apply to God and humans, such as beauty.<sup>49</sup> Hence, we are stuck in the realm of concepts where we look for any kind of words that univocally can be applied to x and y, but even though such concepts can be found, they still are not capable of revealing to us the very individual substance of each thing. We can speak of similitudes, of the accidents things can have in common, but we cannot define each individual substance by using words that can also be applied to other individual things. The incarnational aspect therefore becomes a limited one.

What does this imply for the image? One of Ockham's relevant statements is that the image is not necessarily made by that of which it is an image.<sup>50</sup> However, when we speak about the image of God according to which humans have been created, this image can be the equivalent of a vestige: created by that of which it is a vestige. Apparently, there is room to argue that the image has preserved a referential character. That certainly is correct, but two important aspects definitely undermine this referential character. Firstly, we must keep in mind that this referential character only concerns the accidental aspect of a particular being. Secondly, there is no memory of God on which we can base our eventual knowledge. God cannot be compared to the other examples provided by Ockham. The image of Hercules only procures knowledge if we have seen Hercules in reality; otherwise, there cannot be any recognition. The same goes for his example of a vestige. We recognize the imprint of the hoof

<sup>45</sup> Cp. (Friedmann 2010).

<sup>46</sup> Ord., dist 2, q. 1: *Ideo propter istam rationem dico quod sapientia divina omnibus modis est eadem essentiae divinae quibus essentia divina est eadem essentiae divinae, et sic de bonitate et iustitia; nec est ibi penitus aliqua distinctio ex natura rei vel etiam non-identitas. Cuius ratio est, quia quamvis talis distinctio vel non-identitas formalis posset poni aequae facilius inter essentiam divinam et sapientiam divinam sicut inter essentiam et relationem, quia tamen est difficilima ad ponendum ubicumque, nec credo eam esse faciliorem ad tenendum quam trinitatem personarum cum unitate essentiae, ideo non debet poni nisi evidenter sequitur ex creditis traditis in Scriptura Sacra vel determinatione Ecclesiae, propter cuius auctoritatem debet omnis ratio captivari.*

<sup>47</sup> Ord., dist 3, q. 9.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.: *ducere in recordationem illius cuius est imago.* See also q. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., q. 9: Q 10: *illa, inquam, substantia creata haberet accidentia eiusdem rationis cum accidentibus dei, et ita vere esset imago ducens in recordationem dei sicut modo statua ducit in recordationem Herculis.*

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., q. 9: *De ratione autem imaginis non est quod sit causata ab illo cuius est imago, sicut imago Herculis sufficit quod causetur ab alio quam ab Hercule.*



of a cow only because we have already seen cows and hoofs.<sup>51</sup> All this does not apply to God. The epistemological and ontological aspects of the image that Augustine still tried to preserve have been lost. The same goes for language as an image. It touches only the accidental aspects of particular beings and it cannot be applied to God and humans. The conclusion must be that, where Augustine maintains that the image of Hector can bridge the epistemological gap between the different realities of God and man, Ockham strongly believes that the image of Hector is no longer capable of giving us access to the divine reality. The image does exist as a trinitarian image, sure, but it remains a concept and has a limited incarnational value. What is left is not the capacities of our mind, our argumentation; no, they do have a limited reach. What is really left, on the contrary, is belief; belief that is based either on the Scripture or on the authority of the Church, and that teaches us that the Trinity is an existing reality in which essence and existence cannot be separated.

## 7. The Reformation: Iconoclasm

This was the epistemological situation at the start of Reformation. The Reformation had to flee into the shelters of fideism, not knowing in fact how to solve the philosophical problems nominalism had confronted theology with. The biggest question was whether any system of reference could still be saved, repaired, or newly invented. How did humans relate to the divine? Unfortunately, the question was not solved. There was a kind of twofold development. On the one hand, the Reformation insisted once more on the role of grace, which came to be understood as a moment of extreme contingency in Late Medieval theology. Not only were humans not able to know God, now that the image of the Trinity was no longer a step towards knowledge of the divine. There was even more: divine grace had indeed become completely unpredictable because God would otherwise be bound to human knowledge and thus lose His sovereignty. What was left was a theology of grace whereby God became a sovereign who was acting completely arbitrarily. Grace was no longer a means of a theological epistemology, but it became part of a theological anthropology, in which the overwhelming power of the original sin became the point of departure. Men were sinners and the only possibility of salvation was divine grace, though no one could count on it. The notion that humans were still reflecting the image of their Creator was no longer of great relevance. As the Reformation was neither able nor willing to solve the philosophical problems nominalism had dared to define, it refused to develop a philosophy of image and refused to design a kind of theological aesthetics.<sup>52</sup> That was the first move. On the other hand, it narrowed down the question of the image in the philosophical sense of the word to the topic of images in the pictorial sense, be it pictures or statues. It favoured iconoclasm as a realistic and destructive counterpart of its refusal to develop a theology of image (though in a later era, even in Protestant countries, the arts flourished).<sup>53</sup> It turned itself against the arts, but it did not confront itself with the question of the image in the field of the arts and the field of philosophy. It did not consider the relation between a pictorial image and the reality, nor did it study the question of the similitude between humans as the images of God and the divine reality.<sup>54</sup> On the contrary, it condemned images as betrayals of the reality to which they pretended to refer. Where Augustine and Ockham still spoke of Hector and Hercules, this was no longer possible in the Reformation. Such examples were taken from a pagan culture; they were taken from the theatre, and from myths that had nothing to do with the

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., q. 9: *Et ita est de vestigio, quod si aliquis videat vestigium bovis recordabitur de bove habitualiter cognito, sed si numquam prius habuisset aliquam notitiam de bove non plus recordaretur de bove quam de asino.*

<sup>52</sup> Cp. Pettegree (2005), in particular the chapter 'The visual Image,' pp. 102–27, who shows that there are some exceptions, especially the role of Cranach. Luther did try to develop a new kind of pictorial template but failed in his endeavors. The same goes for Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, Chicago 2003, who shows in a masterful way how Cranach modified the iconic scheme of the catholic tradition, thus creating a new template, but also destroying older ways of representing the divine. See also Viladesau (2008), in particular chp. II, The Protestant Reformation in the Church and the Arts, online, as well as (Finney 1999).

<sup>53</sup> Cp. (Finney 1999).

<sup>54</sup> Though it has to be admitted that there was already in the late medieval age a tendency to a different form of self-understanding and therefore also to a different form of representation and self-representation. See, for a detailed analysis, (Herbert 2017).

Scriptures, and therefore their existence had to be ignored. In a way, it represented the false church as opposed to the true church—a theme that was of paramount importance.<sup>55</sup> Iconoclasm was, in the end, the answer of the Reformation both on the level of arts and on the level of theology<sup>56</sup>: any theology of image was abandoned. The only visual aspects that were still accepted were the visual elements of the Last Supper and Baptism. They were considered to be signs that represented something of a seal, proving the veracity of the One who had pressed it into humans, but this sacramental theology did not lead to any theological aesthetics. The world of faith therefore became completely disconnected from the arts,<sup>57</sup> but even more so from the philosophical problems that went along with the notion of image, which from now on belonged exclusively to the arts. It was the arts that were to develop a philosophy of aesthetics. As Brad Gregory<sup>58</sup> has already concluded, the Reformation wanted to reform but it ended up in destructive tendencies. The Counter-Reformation, in its turn, used the arts as means of propaganda and valued the arts in a positive way. However, it could only accept the arts if they were willing to illustrate the message of the church, which, shortly after the Tridentinum, started its fight with rationalism as an independent capacity to analyse the physical reality apart from faith. This situation was to last until the end of the 19th century and found its last expression in the *Syllabus Errorum* of 1864. However, the Catholic tradition of the Counter-Reformation, though fully incorporated in the prevailing culture it was substantially involved in shaping, did not develop a new doctrine of the epistemological value of images, nor did it develop a new anthropology that viewed humans in another perspective than the one that had been left by Augustine and nominalism. The result, therefore, of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation was that the notion of image became a void one. It had long functioned as a bridge between humans and the inconceivable reality of the divine, but now it had lost this referential character.

## 8. Modern Times: The Separation of a Visual Culture and Religion

Which brings us to modern times. There is nothing new in saying that modern culture is, for the greatest part, a visual culture.<sup>59</sup> One is constantly reminded of the fact that what really matters is one's image. Image indeed has become prevalent in our culture and its presence in many forms seems to be everywhere. In our daily life, we are walking from screen to screen; we are constantly watching our mobile phones and we are trying to make ourselves as attractive as possible, thanks to the images we create on Facebook, Instagram, and so on. We want to be looked at, by others as well as by ourselves, and taking selfies has therefore become one of the strongest means of satisfying this need. Yet, though images are omnipresent and though they represent a dominating force in our lives, they no longer possess the referential character they once had. The modern image tells us that 'what you see is what you get' and there is nothing behind it. It creates its own reality and it no longer reflects another one. The best example of this phenomenon is perhaps the world of modern politics. A politician must present herself to his electors and therefore will take into account what these electors want to hear. Presenting herself and her ideas would not do and she will have to comply with the demands of her electors. What she will therefore give them is an image of herself, an image that will satisfy the often-irrational needs of her electors. The perfect example of this imagining one's own image is the actual President of the U.S., a man who is no less in love with his image than his electors. However, the image he created is the only reality that is left and it does not have any referential character. His image no longer refers to any value; it does not refer to any tradition within the story of democracy,

<sup>55</sup> Cp. the drawings of Lucas Cranach the Younger, picturing the difference between the true and false religion. Cp. ([The Staatliche Museen Zu Berlin et al. 2016](#)).

<sup>56</sup> A striking example, focusing in particular on the St. Bavo in Haarlem (Netherlands) is given by Mia M. [Mochizuki \(2008\)](#). See also ([Michalski 1993](#)).

<sup>57</sup> Cp. Randall C. [Zachman \(2007\)](#), who distinguishes in Calvin the rejection of pictorial art as 'dead' images, that can be opposed to the living images that Calvin allows.

<sup>58</sup> ([Gregory 2012](#)).

<sup>59</sup> Cp. ([Heywood and Sandywell 1999](#); [Rampley 2005](#); [Plate 2002](#)).

nor to any institution inherited from the structures laid down by Montesquieu. This example can be expanded to many others. Who would not be surprised to see ‘the mother of all parliaments,’ the parliament of the UK, abasing itself to a kind of ongoing cabaret (at least in the month I am writing this article, March 2019)? Therefore, if power is obtained not by arguments, not by strategy, but by images, then the conclusion has to be that the modern visual culture is no longer the exclusive domain of arts or fashion; on the contrary, it has become the principal vector of our existence. Without creating one’s image, without being looked at, one can scarcely pretend to exist. Curiously, the image is, literally, no longer an image because it no longer reflects an original of which it is the representation. An image, officially, can only be the image of something else—the original that gave birth to the image. Nowadays, however, the image has become its own reality and there is no need to refer to an underlying reality that is at the same time more complex and more simple than the image can be. This underlying reality can be a story, it can be a belief, it can be a tradition and so on; but all these kinds of realities are nowadays considered to be completely outdated. One might even say that the few stories that are still left provoke a growing aversion. The story of Europe does not inspire anymore, but is considered to be harmful to national interests. The story of democracy seems to be attacked and torn apart by two opposite forces: on the one hand, the cry for a strong man, and on the other, the cry for a people’s democracy without any system of representation. The story of tolerance and hospitality is swept away by the argument of the ‘clash of civilizations.’

## 9. Christianity in a Confessional Shelter

All in all, the values of Christianity and the Enlightenment seem to be at an end. This is a phenomenon that can easily be described as the mere result of technological progress and mass-media, but it is perhaps more complicated. The Christian story of the image has certainly contributed to the creation of this void image that no longer has a referential character.<sup>60</sup> It has definitely damaged the anthropology that pictured humans as more than mere puppets, abandoned by their Creator. Images have been devaluated in the long history of theology. They lost their ontological status and were merely interpreted as the reflection of moral behaviour, and thus it is within the Christian tradition that they had already lost their referential character. By focusing on morality, on the ontological inferiority, Christianity abandoned the strands of a positive approach to human existence. It is important not to conceal the role of Christian theology in these developments. This matters even more when we think of linking this development to various shifts that have changed the religious landscape in recent times. The main shift is perhaps the increasing influence of orthodoxy and evangelicalism, which often go hand in hand. Christianity seems to adopt the same attitude as it did in the second half of the 19th century, when it turned itself against modernism, against modern scholarship on the Bible and on the history of Christianity. Issues such as homosexuality, the role and place of women, euthanasia, and abortion have all become watersheds between modern liberal society and traditional Christianity.<sup>61</sup> This traditional Christianity does not consider itself as traditional, however, but as authentic and as a tradition that has preserved the message of the Bible. It is, in that sense, a current that aligns itself with Harnack and his *Hellenisierungsthese*. There is, in this concept, an original message of Christianity that should not be attenuated by cultural influences. On the contrary, there are some essentials (at some time called *fundamentals*<sup>62</sup>) which cannot be exposed to the risk of being weakened by modern

<sup>60</sup> In that sense, it is absolutely correct to presuppose that Christianity and secularization are connected to one another. Cp. (Bourdieu 2015, pp. 192–205).

<sup>61</sup> Cp. (Zafirovski 2009). To make this perfectly clear, the following quote may suffice: ‘For illustration, US religious and political “reborn” conservatives condemn, attack, and seek to destroy liberal-secular, implicitly Jeffersonian, democracy in America and beyond for its imputed ungodliness, notably the “mortal sin” of promoting and protecting human liberty at the expense of supra-human causes. These causes involve the primacy of Deity, including Biblical revelation, truth and inerrancy, faith and piety, religiously determined strict moral virtues, and nationalistic patriotism’ (p. 258).

<sup>62</sup> Cp. (Schimmel 2008).

liberalism.<sup>63</sup> It is, in a way, another result of secularism, as secularism obliged religion to become a domain apart, no longer sharing public space with public institutions such as law, education, politics, and so on. As Torkel Brekke has it: *'religion came to be seen as a thing that could be detached from culture.'*<sup>64</sup> Therefore, the dialogue between culture and religion was transformed into an opposition, leading to a kind of essentialism. This essentialism, which is far removed from modern scholarship, is reinforced by a kind of naïve fideism that pretends that the Scriptures are a source which is directly accessible and directly applicable. There is no awareness of the fact that the Scriptures are the product of a certain culture, that text and context cannot be separated one from another and that they should be interpreted extremely carefully because our knowledge of the times the Scriptures were born is limited. Assuming, however, that one should leave aside this cultural aspect, even then it should be clear that the voice of the Lord is only the voice the author of one of the sacred Books considers to be the voice of the Lord, without us knowing what His voice really is. In that sense, Ockham was right. However, these basic insights seem not to be relevant for the many believers with an orthodox or evangelical background. They consciously want to oppose themselves against modern liberalism (though not against economic liberalism) and find in their belief a stronghold against these modern times.<sup>65</sup> It must be added here that these tendencies are not limited to the evangelical movement alone. It is also present in a highly academic current such as Radical Orthodoxy and one could indeed uphold that even Radical Orthodoxy ends up in fideism.<sup>66</sup> Radical Orthodoxy does not style itself in a less controversial way and it strongly insists on the nihilism our society is suffering from. Yet, by accusing modern society of nihilism and by clearly defining itself as the remedy against this nihilism, it contributes to widening the gap, once again, between Christian belief and modern society.<sup>67</sup> The consequences of approaches such as mentioned hereabove are far from innocent. Because of their basic tenets, because of their roots in fideism and essentialism, these tendencies transform themselves into an identity discourse. Modern orthodox Christians do have a strong sense of their identity, and this identity is not compatible with modern liberalism, modern views on sexuality, on ethics, and so on. President Trump was elected with the full support of the evangelicals, because he is critical on abortion. He is even well supported by white evangelical women who prioritize issues such as immigration, Christian identity, and ethics over their own gender identity.<sup>68</sup>

## 10. Image as a Stumbling Block for Christianity

In the midst of these developments, the whole question about the nature of images really matters. Indeed, the query of what images are and to what kind of reality they refer has been abandoned in our times. In our visual culture, the reference of the image to an original seems to be an issue that completely lacks relevance. If my image satisfies me, it is not because it fits into any greater story, such as the story of Europe, of democracy, or of Christianity. It fits because it reflects a 'me' which I consider to be the real 'me.' How do I know this 'me' fits 'me'? Because it is a similitude: it resembles others, but at the same time it is purely individual. It resembles others sufficiently enough to allow me not to worry about not being like the others. At the same time, it allows me, up to a certain extent, to be

<sup>63</sup> Cp. Brouwer et al. (1996), which distinguishes four characteristics of this new fundamentalism: anti-Catholic, anti-feminist, anti-Communist, anti-Islam.

<sup>64</sup> (Brekke 2012, p. 64).

<sup>65</sup> A clear example of this opposition between this traditional view and a more modern one can be traced in the French debate between *La manif pour tous* et *Le mariage pour tous*. Cp. (Fracchiolla 2015).

<sup>66</sup> Cp. Sharpe and Nickelson (2014), in particular chp. VII, *In the Beginning Was ... the Story? On Secularisation, Narrative and Nominalisms*, pp. 109–28.

<sup>67</sup> Cp. The critical study of Shakespeare (2000, pp. 163–77), who quotes "There is no such thing as a secular realm, a part of the world that can be elevated above God and explained and investigated apart from him. There is however a great difference between Radical Orthodoxy and evangelical Christianity. The latter opposes itself against our modern culture by rejecting, the former engages in a fierce debate and fortunately dares to use philosophical argumentation. Still, it is used in order to state that culture without Christianity is lost." from Philip Blond.

<sup>68</sup> PEW Research Center, 18/3/2019: Evangelical approval of Trump remains high, but other religious groups are less supportive ([www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org)).

different from the others. This similitude suffers from the same difficulty as the one Ockham already drew attention to. It remains a concept without touching on the reality behind, without even being able to state whether there is a reality behind, because such a reality would always be a very particular and individual reality, one that cannot be related to a multitude of reflections and vestiges of it. This all suggests that the relations between humans in our time are comparable to a similitude between images. This strongly affects the way religion is conceived in our times and the way it develops. Religion accepts the break between the image and a reality behind the image; it is even one of the main causes of this break, and it does not care about reframing the theological anthropology. It does not try to re-establish the link between humans and the divine on the basis of an ontological notion of image. As it has left the notion of the image to the outside world—the cultural one—it is obliged to seek its truth outside the culture. Therefore, and unavoidably, in order to remain present within the surrounding culture, it must increasingly seek its foundation in itself, and it will become, compared to the culture in which it functions, more and more orthodox. That will, of course, create an increasing tension with this surrounding world. Religion in that sense is one of the most important dynamics in the current cultural wars, but, though it is a real and important aspect of modern binaries and divisions, this does not imply that society at large will become more religious in the traditional sense. The tension, then, between society and religion can only be resolved by focusing on specific issues that result from the orthodox confessional point of view. To put it quite straightforwardly, it can only be resolved by creating new battlefields, such as sexuality and gender equality, among others. Putting it differently: though religion no longer cares about the nature of image, it does use the void images we are living with. As there is no longer any theological anthropology making clear what could be the relation between humans and the divine, these void images that are left behind can still be used to discriminate between humans. When no one upholds that man and woman are created equal and that they are both created in the image of God, and when no one upholds this on the basis of a sane referential character of the image, it becomes easy to state that there is a difference between man and woman, as between black and white, homosexual and heterosexual, and so on. The loss of the referential character of the image procures the possibility for these fideist currents to create harmful distinctions. A certain backslide within the domain of values is therefore not unlikely; on the contrary. This is the paradox we will have to live with. Religion in the sense of confessional belief becomes less present. Yet, at the same time, its influence is only increasing in the domain of politics and society. The notion of the image, which once was an epistemological notion capable of handing over some knowledge of the divine, has become a void image, and it had already become so within the theology of the Reformation. This void image is one the main sources of our visual culture, where radical conservatism becomes the hallmark of the cultural wars and where the biggest bones of contention are situated in the domain of morals, gender, sexuality, and so on. That is, for the larger part, due to the fact that Christianity failed to reframe the notion of image and to restore the ontological relation between humans and the divine.

## 11. Conclusions, Cultural Theology Based on a Sound Anthropology

Looking back, then, to the beginning of this article and the question of secularization, my view will be clear. There is no return of religion in the traditional confessional sense of the word. Yet, religion continues to mark our society. It has transformed itself into a cultural statement, whilst at the same time positioning itself outside the dominating culture. It hopes to conquer the world not by missionary activities, but by associating itself with political points of view. In that sense, religion has proven to be capable of transforming itself, though at the same time this mechanism of political and religious interests intertwining and intersecting is a well-known phenomenon. Yet, one should also want to raise the question as to whether there is any ‘solution’ to this failing anthropology. The question is a difficult one. In principle, both the Catholic and Protestant traditions have had the opportunity to develop a balanced anthropology, in which the emphasis could have been put on the fact that all humans have been created in the image of God. In the words of Schleiermacher: *All that is human is*



*holy, for all is divine.*<sup>69</sup> The Protestant tradition, which had, admittedly, since its birth turned away from culture and arts, could have done so because of its pneumatological character. This character could have relativized the importance of the church and its confessional tradition. Unfortunately, the confessional aspect became stronger and stronger and the Protestant tradition lost its capacity to relativize its own institutional nature. It was no longer capable of seeing beyond the walls of the church. The same goes, in fact, for the Catholic tradition, which had already developed a strong anti-modernist tradition by the 19th century. Yet, the Catholic tradition originally insisted strongly on the incarnation and therefore could have been capable of seeing the reflection of the divine in all human beings. Of course it did so, but it narrowed down this acknowledgement to those people who belonged to the church. Put simply: in both traditions the confessional aspect dominated the original intuitions, and this was due to the fear that modernity and rationality would definitely harm the place and role of the church. To echo Schleiermacher once again, they venerated a Scripture that was no more than a mausoleum, a monument for the spirit that once was there but that no longer dwells in letters hard as stone.<sup>70</sup> This tendency deepened the gap between culture and society on the one hand and the church and belief on the other. It led, indeed, to a kind of fideism that was considered to be a stronghold in times of increasing antagonisms and that could only make its voice heard by creating a nexus with conservative political stances. At least, this is the case in the early 21st century. Earlier, in the 1990s, Protestant churches in particular did the contrary and associated themselves with progressive views. The mechanism, however, has remained the same: confession losing influence and trying to preserve it by cherry-picking at the table of politicians. Yet, if Christianity were to redefine its position and if it were willing to contribute to creating a counterweight to the visual culture in which no image refers anymore to a reality behind it, it should develop a new concept of what makes humans human, based on a sane doctrine of the image of God. That would imply and demand a full commitment to society and culture instead of emphasising opposition. It would also demand the awareness that religion is nothing more than one of the human cultural expressions, not a domain apart. What Christianity needs, therefore, is the kind of spirit Schleiermacher showed in his *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, in which he shed off all confessionalism. His wording is unsurpassed and merits to be reread in our times: *You wish always to stand on your own feet and go your own way, and this worthy intent should not scare you from religion. Religion is no slavery, no captivity, least of all for your reason. You must belong to yourselves. Indeed, this is an indispensable condition of having any part in religion.*<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> F. Schleiermacher, *On religion: Speeches to the Cultured Despisers*, Fourth speech.

<sup>70</sup> F. Schleiermacher, *op. cit.* Second speech

<sup>71</sup> F. Schleiermacher, *op. cit.* Second Speech, translated by John Oman 1893, online 2006.

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