

## Response to Melissa Raphael

A response to Melissa Raphael's article 'The creation of beauty by its destruction: the idoloclastic aesthetic in modern and contemporary Jewish art'. Key themes discussed include the notion of human beings as created in the image of God, Levinas's understanding of the face and its ethical demand as well as the contemporary issue of the commodification of the human face in digital media.

### 'In the image'

The perception of human beings as having been created by God in his own image appears only three times in the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 1:26–7, 5:1–3, 9:6), but it is nevertheless an apprehension of fundamental significance in Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologies alike (Hoekema 1986: 11). All three traditions advocate the idea that the universe is 'freely created by one God who cares for it and offers human beings a special role to play in its development' (Burrell and Malits 1997: 7). Within these traditions, the creator's initiative can also be regarded as the source of all human creativity. In David Cheetham's words, the works of artists can be understood as creations related to God's initial creation, but also to the inner landscapes of the heart (Cheetham 2010: 76). As such, they may provide a space for empathic creativity and imagination and the notion of being 'in the image' can serve as an important starting point for interreligious dialogue.

'In the image' is one of the key notions in Melissa Raphael's intriguing article about beauty and finitude in modern and contemporary Jewish art. Raphael seeks to explore Jewish art produced not in spite of but *because of* the Second Commandment, which states:

You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, nor any manner of likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them, nor serve them.  
(Ex. 20:3–4)

Raphael argues that intentionally Jewish art actively tries to prevent cognitive capacity from being associated with idols. Hence, such images always bear witness to human suffering, loss, finitude – summarised in her effective concept of pathos. Artistic depictions of human beings are nothing more than images of images, that is, of God. In this context, the intriguing question of what it means that God created human beings in his image arises. Judeo-Christian theology offers a great number of answers to the question of how to understand this likeness: some find it in the cognitive capacities of the human mind, others in the moral capacities humans employ. Is everyone equally the image, one can also ask, or are some images more distorted than others? (See e.g. Welz 2011, Vainio 2014)

Raphael, for her part, engages in this discussion at length in the book *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art* (2009), where she states 'that God creates people in his image and who themselves make images tells us something about the transmissibility of value and meaning from God to the world' (49). What 'something' might that be? How can creativity and the making of aesthetic images be understood in ethical and existential terms, against the background of the entanglement of being an image and creating images? In the current article, where the relationship between being an image and

creating images is analysed in relation to the Second Commandment, Raphael specifies this standpoint in a clarificatory way. In my reading of her argument, she approaches the image from a broader perspective than has usually been employed in aesthetic theology, surpassing the dichotomy of rational versus spiritual. Thus, a dynamic unity of body and soul is formed that measures up to the rational, embodied and enspirited beings which humans actually are. 'That the human is made in the image of God does not render the human face an icon or cast of God. God cannot be read off from the human face,' Raphael states (2009: 7). Hence, the image is not an easy, one-to-one resemblance, but rather 'an imprint of a kiss on the human face,' as was formulated by Raphael herself in delivering the lecture that this article is based on.

Thus, to argue that an artist's image of a person is nothing more than 'an image of an image,' as Raphael does in her article, is not to devalue art and the importance of art in making visible certain ethical and existential questions of human life. Rather, it is a way of limiting the capacity of art to function as a source of objects of idol worship. From this perspective, human dignity and relationality become central aspects of what the phrase 'in the image' might mean. If theology and philosophy fall short of fully explaining the meaning it may carry for an individual in her lived reality to perceive of herself as being created by God in his image, one can stumble over a 'surplus of meaning' (Welz 2010: 87) within the arts. At this point, the arts can bring in a new perspective, illuminating aspects that previously had been left unnoticed, as Raphael shows in her analysis.

Dara Horn's novel *In the Image* (2002) – a paraphrase of the biblical story of Job, situated in present-day New York, with flashbacks to the Jewish communities in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Eastern Europe – illuminates this argument. Horn's fictive hero Bill Landsmann concludes that the fundament of a life worth living and a reality in which it is worthwhile to call oneself a human being includes a language, a literature, a hand held by a loved and lost mother, in short 'an entire world lived and breathed in the image of God' (71).

### Beauty and the face – Levinas

In her article, Raphael also alludes to Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy as an illuminating perspective

on how beauty and death – and morality, I would add – in art can be understood. 'Only a finite face faces loss,' Raphael argues. She elucidates the contrast between the image of a face and a real human face by pointing to Levinas's argument that the human face always brings with it a moral summons, calling the self to its responsibility and demanding of the I that it gives itself to and for the other that 'counts more than myself' (Levinas 1969: 215).

In the book *Theology and the Arts: Engaging Faith* (2013) W. Alan Smith and I have elaborated on Levinas's notion of the face as a key to understanding the role of the arts for theology. In our reading, the arts may open up the possibility of making the face of the other visible in an alternative, oftentimes more tangible way than merely words can achieve. The face of the other signifies otherwise than one's own powers and resists possession; there is no 'and' possible between myself and the other (Levinas 1969: 197; Illman and Smith 2013: 39–40). Nevertheless, the face of the other is close and engaging and makes a moral claim on the self: to bridge distance and proximity, similarity and difference. The face makes it clear that the world is not ordered around the self, but 'primarily oriented towards the otherwise' (Dalton 2009: 39), for the sake of the other. The other 'counts above all else' and 'tolerates only a personal answer' (Levinas 1969: 219, 304).

The argument that the arts can make the face of the other, in an ethical and existential sense, visible in a clearer and more tangible way seems reasonable in relation to Raphael's analysis. Above all, it resonates well with the vital point made in her article: that beauty does not mean to overcome the limits of the human condition but to endure them. Above all, it is worth highlighting Raphael's clear-sighted conclusion: 'God has created us to flourish together; we stand under moral, not aesthetic, judgement.'

### Commodification – human images that do not have pathos

Raphael ends her paper with a thorough critique of the commodification of the human face and human bodies in contemporary visual culture. One may read her argument as suggesting that commodification poses the greatest challenge to the Second Commandment today, resulting in the 'immediate crises and alienations of our age' she refers to at the end. Raphael highlights how digitally manipulated

images of human beings actually become non-human. These images appear human-like but bear no traces of loss, suffering and death, leaving behind the limitations of the human condition such as incompleteness, suffering and vulnerability – in short, images with no face and no pathos. What happens to the image of God in a digitally perfected face?

In Raphael's view, contemporary Jewish art does not simply disfigure images but rather transfigures them in order to, as I understand it, bridge the dichotomies of body and soul, material and spiritual, immanent and transcendent – a 'Messianic freedom of idea and spirit from political tyranny', she writes. This approach could be described as a non-binary aesthetics, a merging of opposites. As such, I agree with her concluding claim that the kind of Jewish aesthetics presented in the article may be well suited to being the source of alternative nuances for our times, which are heavily laden with easy, black-and-white solutions, certain – even fanatical – convictions of what is right and what is wrong, good and bad – and always available through consumption. ■

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interreligious dialogue, religion and art, and contemporary Judaism. Among her recent publications are the books *Art and Belief: Artists Engaged in Interreligious Dialogue* (Routledge 2012) and *Theology and the Arts: Engaging Faith*, co-authored with W. Alan Smith (Routledge 2013, paperback edn 2016). She is the editor of *Approaching Religion* and *Scripta Instituti Donneriani*, published by the Donner Institute, and, together with Karin Hedner Zetterholm, of the peer-reviewed journal *Nordisk judaistik - Scandinavian Jewish Studies*.

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