Dis-continuities: The role of religious motifs in contemporary art
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Introduction: Situating Contemporary Art and Religion

Walking into one of the exhibition rooms of Bozar in Brussels in the autumn of 2010, I was puzzled by a sculptural work that offered a strangely familiar, yet enigmatic image. Helix DHAACO, 2008, by Wim Delvoye (1965) is part of a series of sculptures consisting of black crucifixes joined to one another in a chain and twisted to form a double helix (Fig. 1.). The work was included in his solo exhibition Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door, 2010-11, and featured his laser cut steel Gothic tower installed on the roof, a scale copy of a Gothic cathedral, and a series of sculptures consisting of similarly twisted multiple crucifixes. Religious art and architecture were the very “material” of Delvoye’s works, to be modified, and literally twisted in a manner that demonstrates both the involvement of contemporary technology and craftsmanship. The bronze crucifixes were rendered in such way that they appeared flexible, and were twisted in a manner that can only be done to soft, yet strong material. Helix DHAACO appropriated a religious symbol to make out of it a DNA model.

The blending of two symbols central to religion and science in the sculpture allude to two different definitions of the concepts of image and image-making, which converge into the motif of the true image, or acheiropoietos. Christ as the true image of God and the genetic “image” of man are in their respective ways not created by the hand of an artist. A central aspect of Delvoye’s sculpture was plasticity as conveyed by the elaborate twisting of the crucifixes, thus emphasising the very gesture and practice of image-making.

During the past decade, a number of exhibitions have explored issues ranging from iconoclasm as a practice situated between art, religion and science, gravity and levitation as a motif in both religious and contemporary art, ways of seeing God in art, heaven, to religion as medium and the return of religion as a myth.1 This demonstrates a distinct interest in religion, its different traditions, manifestations in public life, gestures, images and practices. Yet, until relatively recently, religion was largely ignored by the contemporary art world.2 The open expression of religiosity in a contemporary artwork was usually regarded as kitsch or in bad taste, inviting quick aesthetic judg-


Fig. 1 Wim Delvoye, *Helix DHAACO*, 2008
ments that distinguish between “high” art and “popular” culture.³

This study focuses on the continued life and afterlife of religious motifs in art produced since the early 1990s in Europe and the United States. Many artists re-appropriated, re-cycled and transformed Christian motifs, themes and images to produce works that cannot qualify as ‘religious.’ Their works are not displayed in a religious context; they circulate within the institutional frame of display of the contemporary art world: museums, galleries and biennales. Many of these works have a distinctly critical approach to religion. They pose a set of questions concerning important moments in the transforming relationships between religion and art, and the ways images are produced and displayed within their respective regimes of representation.

The appropriation of religious images, their distinctly non-religious interpretations in contemporary artworks and their display in such contexts as the contemporary art museum or gallery are significant symptoms of the shifting positions of religion and art in the present moment. In many exhibitions and art works, religion is taken as a subject of critical reflection, while art is considered as its medium, a frame for rethinking the role of religion. This indicates a desire to re-evaluate their respective regimes of visibility, as well as questions related to the very regime of identification of art images and the distinction between art and non-art images. How does contemporary art reposition itself with regard to religion and religious art? How are the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, religious and non-religious art defined and re-defined in the present-day moment? Does the citation of religious motifs tell us something about art and its production and circulation in the present? In what way do they change their meaning when they are re-embedded in the context of a new artwork? What are the functions and effects of such motifs in their new context?

In yet another sense, religion and art cannot be neatly separated, and the complex relationship between them cannot be explained within the linear narrative of “progressive demythologization, disenchantment, and secularization.”⁴ Both the concepts of religion and the departure from it with the process of secularization were first articulated with the Enlightenment when religion became more and more a private

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3 This is a point on which virtually all participants in the symposium Re-Enchantment agreed, although they held otherwise quite different positions. Art Institute of Chicago, 17 April, 2007.

4 Hent de Vries observes that the complexity of religion cannot be reduced to a single concept: “That much is certain no simple linear narrative or causal explanation, least of all a logic of progressive demythologization, disenchantment, and secularization is capable of attaining clear, univocal designation to any ‘concept’ of religion.” Religion Beyond a Concept, Ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 2. According to the well-known postulation of Max Weber in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, religion and Protestantism in particular, played an important role in the development of capitalism and modern societies.
Religion is a multifaceted phenomenon, which is increasingly difficult to define. It has a capacity to survive and modify itself; as de Vries points out it “is nothing outside or independent of the series of its metamorphoses, its metastases.” It is not a fixed set of practices, institutions, texts and images, but a developing entity that is a subject of constant re-reading and change. Jean-Luc Nancy argues in his ongoing project of deconstruction of Christianity that central to monotheism is its self-deconstructive nature. Marcel Gauchet, along similar lines, calls Christianity a “religion of departure of religion”, and argues that it contains the reasons for, and is engaged in a process of secularisation.

Secularization of art cannot be conceptualised simply as a process in which art departs from religion. The concepts of “art” and “religion” are to a large extent modern and any history of their changing relationship over the course of the last two centuries should acknowledge that. “Religious” or “non-religious” art are categories with fuzzy boundaries, which are constantly being renegotiated, especially in twentieth-century contexts. Both religion and art are social phenomena. A crucial part of the changing relationships between them, especially since the last century, can be understood adequately if their social infrastructure is considered. Religious images, before becoming art, had a distinct public significance and power. Their later transformation into art as part of church interiors, and subsequent display in the context of museum collections, was followed by art gaining itself a “sacred significance” or taking the role of a kind of a public practice that discusses the “realm of elevated ideals.”

The divine was a central subject matter for the visual arts for centuries. The functions of many images produced by a human hand in the distant past, and accessible to our contemporary gaze, were determined largely by religious practices and contexts. Images were important to Christian religion. Undoubtedly, they had a different significance and interpretation within its different traditions and theologies. Within the
complex history of the internally heterogeneous tradition and body of thought forming Christianity, images were produced, disseminated and appreciated in a variety of ways as they translated invisible religious truths into visible and tangible entities. Yet they were also an object of violent rejection and attacks. Images presented in a material medium always needed some kind of invisible or transcendent meaning to justify its existence, and the other way around, the transcendent always articulated some kind of visibility and materiality, even through its negation. Thus the image and the transcendent were mutually dependent not only during the not-so-distant historical past in which religion played a dominant role in societies, but also in a more disguised, yet still visible way, in a culture today dominated by mass-media incessantly producing a plethora of visual images. Within the context of the monotheist traditions, hostile to figurative representations of the divine, Christianity developed a complex theology of the image and left a massive visual legacy that constituted a substantial part of what we today call “Western art.” This tradition played an important role in the history of art through the way it defined, used and disciplined the image, which played a crucial role in circulating the religious message. Christianity understood early enough that images have political power.\(^\text{10}\)

The question of the relationships between contemporary art and different religious traditions lends itself to being approached from a variety of perspectives, which can vary according to national contexts, central issues discussed and theoretical tools. The one I adopt, focuses on art that understands itself and is considered secular; it traces the transformation of the status of religious motifs and their gradual detachment from a situation of religious worship and integration into the realm of art. The focus of my study is not theological. In other words, I am not so much interested in how the divine is expressed in art, but in the re-mediation of religious motifs in

\(^{10}\)Bram Kempers discusses the main features of this transforming relationship: “While the magnetic appeal of religion has declined, art has gained significance of elevated ideals. … Famous modern artists are seen as the true descendants of Renaissance geniuses, and art specialists cast themselves in the role of preservers of the great tradition of patronage. Together they have made museums the cult places of modern society. Intellectual circles honor modern artists while to most of society the new saints are sports champions and pop stars. Where religion no longer has a monopoly on the appeal of the spiritual or the challenge of the unknown, art has itself acquired a sacred significance that has soared far above the social struggle to achieve status, wealth and power.” Painting, Power and Patronage: The Rise of the Professional Artist in Renaissance Italy. Trans. by Beverley Jackson (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 317. \(^{11}\)In Marie-José Mondzain’s words “In promoting the visibility of God in his Christic incarnation, and indentifying it simultaneously as the ecclesiastic institution, St. Paul laid the iconocratic field open to the design of empires.” Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary. Trans. Rico Franses (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) p. 59.
contemporary artworks, the effects it produces and the questions it poses. Thus, the increasingly complex relationship between religion and art in twentieth-century contexts is examined from a particular angle, taking its point of departure from a ‘cold’ definition of religion, as opposed to focusing on a positive expression of spirituality or religiosity in and through images. A central point of interest is the interaction between an image or an artwork and the conditions of its display, and, specifically, the effects of placing religious motifs in secular contexts.

The artworks discussed refer to and are in dialogue with the visual legacy of mostly the Western, and more specifically the Catholic, version of Christianity. Of course, contemporary artists show an interest in and include references to its Orthodox versions. Yet when this happens it does so in a context marked by a recent history that suppressed organised religion in Eastern Europe, and when artists turn to its visual legacy, their works are more inclined to be in touch with spiritual content. Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism created a symbolic and visual vocabulary that permeates contemporary visual cultures, which artists use in a variety of ways and to different ends, from expressing spiritual views and messages, to making highly critical statements. Tracing the complex interactions between those religious traditions across different cultural contexts, each characterised by its own version of contemporary art, would be a task for further studies. It would be, no doubt, an important study to examine how religion and contemporary art are related in non-western contexts and in contexts that are influenced by religious traditions that are less centred upon the image than Christianity. Unquestionably, religious motifs and themes are present on many levels in a variety of art forms and fields of culture: film and literature, but also music and popular culture. In many instances religious motifs are used to critically reflect on the role of religion in contemporary societies. But religion also provides a tremendously rich source of narratives, which inspire artists, filmmakers and writers and are subject of their own interpretation. There are many, already classic, examples: Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), Krzysztof Penderecki’s music permeated by religious themes, or Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel *The Master and Margarita* (1937, 1967) to mention just a few. The focus of my study is contemporary visual art, and the questions posed by the continued presence of religious motifs in present-day artworks.

The line of analysis I pursue in this study addresses a contemporary phenomenon, and is necessarily informed by ideas, concepts and approaches belonging to a variety of fields and their intersections. It is influenced by the work of specialists who define the history of images as not necessarily overlapping with the history of art, and question its boundaries. Hans Belting has argued for considering images from an an-
thropological perspective and his earlier work charted out the lives of images before the “era of art.”

Georges Didi-Huberman offers a critical reflection on the discipline of art history, which tends to create its object into its own image, thus occluding possible directions of research. His work on the significance of the idea of incarnation for Christian art, but also his studies on the invention of hysteria as a case involving interaction between medical science, early photography and art, extensive study of the technique and concept of the imprint, as well as studies of the work of Aby Warburg, provided important and inspiring departure points. Warburg’s line of thinking about time, history and the image, already an influential and well researched body of work, provided the outlines of a model to consider the continuities and the discontinuities and in the lives of images different and often distant both in contexts of time and space.

Bram Kempers insists on considering artworks in relation to their social contexts, which influence artists in ways that cannot be defined as strictly belonging to the realm of aesthetic questions.

Jacques Rancière’s discussion of the different regimes of representation provided a model for an important distinction between different strata of images and the way their status and distribution is regulated by specific requirements and rules.

Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophical reflection on the internal complexity of monotheism and Christianity and its engagement in a process of continuous self-deconstruction provided an important insight into the way it defined


the question of the image and its relationship to the body. Contemporary art theory, and in particular the writing of Thierry de Duve on the role of presentational devices, and of Rosalind Krauss on the issue of originality, found an intriguing resonance with those of art historian Joseph Koerner and philosopher Marie-José Mondzain, on the issue of the motif of acheiropoietos, central to my study.

The question of the relationship between contemporary art and religion necessarily involves a closer look at approaches taken by curators who organised exhibitions exploring the different aspects of this relationship. They are scholars and public figures, art historians, philosophers, art theorists who, with their respective approaches, offer a variety of possible stories about religion and art in the present day. I was interested in their ways of framing the issue, and part of my discussion provides a commentary on that level.

I propose to consider the continued life of religious motifs in contemporary art on several levels. Besides being a repetition of imagery from the past, religious motifs embedded in contemporary artworks become a means to problematise not only the way different periods in the history of art are delimited, but larger and seemingly more rigid distinctions as those between art and non-art images. Such distinctions cannot be reduced to historical periods; they are what Rancière calls “regimes” of the image (or of the arts), and what Hans Belting in his study of the Christian image calls “eras” of the image. Belting has argued that within Christian art, the era of the early religious cult image differs significantly from that of “the art image” and that images produced and circulated in these two eras are regulated according to a different set of rules. While the cult image was venerated as a living person, carried to different places to be shown and “embodied the public claims of a community”, the art image “was acknowledged for its own sake”, created by a “famous artist and defined by a proper theory.” Rancière makes a similar distinction, which exceeds the strictly historical definition, of three regimes of the arts – ethical, poetic and aesthetic – characterised

by different ways of conceptualising the conditions of their production, use and display. It is important to emphasise that regime is largely determined by extra-visual issues; in contrast to a historical period, which is characterised by, among other things, a distinct style (i.e. a set of visual elements). Such issues are related to the conditions of production and display of images and the way they are invested with the status of being true or authentic instances of art or sacred images.

Decisive for the properly religious image, what Belting calls the “cult image”, is the fact that it claims to convey an invisible transcendent truth and does not simply represent. Exemplary for this group of images is the image not made by an artist’s hand, or *acheiropoietos*. The transformation and survival of this motif is of central interest in my study. It is associated with a divine origin, as if produced by direct contact with the body of Christ, or a miraculous appearance such as the *Veil of Veronica* in the Western, or the Mandylion in the Eastern tradition. However, the “truth” of such an image, and subsequently the reason that it becomes a focal point for the communal gaze, depends upon concealing both the procedures of its making, and of defining it as true. To a large extent such procedures are extra-visual. Arguably, many aspects of this motif are defining for the distinction of the image before the era of art, to use Belting’s term, and the art-image. Its transformations can reveal much about the way images are used, defined and acquire their status or display. This motif is pervasively present (also in other religious traditions) in different periods of Christian art and, in its modified and less recognisable version, it seems to be important to the present day.

The motif of the true image is central to the definition of an image as public and as endowed with a special religious and political power. In a broader sense, it is related to such issues as how images acquire the status of being true, true instances of art or incarnations of profound spiritual truth, or true documentary images, what criteria there are to determine their status and veracity and how a community or an audience formulates them. According to Mondzain this category of images, determined by an inherently tautological condition, are surprisingly similar in their operations to a contemporary object as the ready–made and to the medium of photography. While the ready-made – an object that is also not made by an artist – brings to visibility the procedures that place an object on display consecrating it as Art, a photograph claims to

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show the incontestable truth of an event that truly happened precisely because to a large extent it eliminates the role of the maker’s hand. The *acheiropoietic* image hides the procedures of its making, which must remain invisible in order to guarantee its status. Next to that, the “truth” of such images is produced by the procedures of presentation of such an object to a community.

The true image is intrinsically related not to presence in the religious sense, but to procedures of presentation, which should be considered equally as procedures of concealment of the maker and the procedures of making the image. The presentability of images is an embodiment of what De Duve in his analysis of a much later period in art, calls “social pacts”, which deem visual objects as “true” instances of Art.\(^{24}\) What he calls “presentational device” renders an object *presentable* to a communal gaze and embodies the power that “makes” it true.\(^{25}\) The presentational devices are all the quasi-visible elements such as frames, stands and showcases that present the artwork (or in the general case an object) to its beholders.\(^{26}\) For instance Veronica’s veil and some of its later representations in painting in many cases involve a frame, which overrules the barely visible image, and the public ostentations of the Shroud are actually procedures of its framing, where the “frame” or presentational device also includes those in power (both religious and political) who show it to the community of believers.

The motif of *acheiropoietos* remains and transforms itself. Arguably, it survives in modern art on a non-iconic level, as in the ready-made object and its claim. Koerner observes that in two earlier and still distinct moments, as in the painting of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) and Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), this motif can be related to the definition of the figure of the artist, and the gesture of display of artistic skill.\(^{27}\) Their painting is characterised by the concealment of the traces of manual labour from the surface of the canvas thus making the image appear miraculously as “not-made.” These sets of issues add up to the larger question of the status of fiction, and its shifting between the art image where it is associated with artistic skill, and the cult image where it is concealed. Besides its relationship to defining the figure of the artist in their art, this motif was embedded as a means of referring to and keeping a trace of the true image and as expressing a religious or spiritual feeling in a positive sense.

The divine was figured in a variety of distinct ways within the different periods of Christian art: from the art of the icon regulated by a specific canon or prescription

\(^{27}\) Joseph Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (Yale University Press, 1995) and *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
as to how to create images and the violent imagery of the scenes of the crucifixion of Christ in the late middle ages, to the vacant landscapes of Friedrich invested with the intense presence of the divine, or the aniconic tendencies in twentieth-century church art. The group of contemporary artworks that deal with or refer to religious themes but do not function in religious contexts and motifs is large and internally heterogeneous. Sam Taylor-Wood, Ron Mueck, Jan Fabre, Maurizio Cattelan, Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas, to mention just a few, created works from the late 1980s and 1990s to the present day, which recycle and reinterpret religious iconography and themes. Their artworks are about religion and its practices, concepts, ideas and images in the sense that they transform it into a theme. In contrast to the successive moments of inventions of ways to visually render the divine in painting, what interests me is the re-working of images and motifs that already exist in contemporary artworks in the discontinuity of their religious function. I am particularly interested in the status of these iconic citations and the questions they pose. A large part of artworks that recycle religious motifs, or engage with religious issues, are not religious themselves and remain (post-)modern and secular. The act of recycling and re-interpreting religious motifs implies not only their visual modification, but also substantial changes in their meaning. They are included in a new context of display, which is the very texture of contemporary artworks and thus they ask questions about images and their uses, and their iconic and political power. Many of these works address or deal with images and gestures related to various forms of Christianity. One reason for this is that the art of Christian traditions constitutes the historical background to the gradual articulation of what we now identify as Western secular art, and as such requires a critical re-evaluation.

The artworks by Bill Viola (1951), Lawrence Malstaf (1970), Victoria Reynolds (1962) and Berlindé de Bruyckere (1964), discussed in the second part of this study, are executed using different media: video, sculpture, photography and painting. They share a visually recognisable reference to central religious symbols, famous pieces of religious art, or characteristic of a historical period pictorial interpretation of a religious theme. The re-working of religious motifs by contemporary artworks functions as a tool to address the conditions of the production and circulation of art images, which are, strictly speaking, invisible or external to the image itself, and which are related to the major distinction between art and non-art images. When contemporary artworks recycle religious motifs they share something with the ready-made and with the motif of the true image. An important aspect of the cult image, in Belting’s definition, or the ethical regime of the image in Rancière’s definition, is that the image’s presentability depends on the fact that it is assumed to be true and associated with an origin, which guarantees its truth. However, as Mondzain points out, its very truth depends on its presentability – it is constructed by it. The motif of acheiropoietos is inherently relat-
ed to the conditions of display of images and to the way they are invested with value, status or power, and to the role of the maker.

The contemporary works that I analyse address the conditions of display, in a broader sense the infrastructure of the present-day regime of the image by recycling religious motifs. These “ready-made”, borrowed images address the very conditions of the practice of image-making and bring them to visibility. While the acheiropoietic image conceals both the maker and the procedures that render it “true,” contemporary artists invert this motif. Artists choose a variety of strategies to embed an existing image or motif from the past into their work. They either restage a well-known painting on a religious subject, or reproduce a religious figure but in a modified way. They present their viewers with a religious figure, recognisable through some iconographic cues, but distorted to such an extent that the contemporary work actually shows the breaking of its resemblance to the source image. The older motif when a contemporary artist employs it in the way described, is in fact emptied of its representative function, i.e. it is not precisely an image of an object. Instead, it becomes a kind of extended frame embedded in the image instead of being positioned at its margin.

Artworks that recycle religious images often raise controversies both in the religious context where they are seen as scandalous, and in the art context where they are seen in some cases as spiritual kitsch. Scandal, however, is a way, and quite a successful one, to convey a religious message precisely because of the shock value of such images. Next to that, the iconoclast believes that others blindly believe in images, and this makes him simply “another person with ‘a strong commitment to representation,’ in this case, that of naïve belief itself.” In other words, the act of breaking a religious image paradoxically means recognition of its power. Furthermore Christian images are themselves inherently iconoclastic by virtue of the fact that their central theme is the death or the “breaking” of God’s true image – Christ. Koerner concludes that religious imagery “has iconoclasm built into it.” This complicates further the status of religious motifs embedded in contemporary artworks. Arguably, artworks that refer to religious images are not iconoclastic in the traditional sense; they do not break images. Still the iconographic references to religious art do have an iconoclastic aspect – they acquire a critical edge. But in these cases the image itself is used as a critical tool. This allows me to conclude that when used in contemporary art religious motifs are not used in a blas-

28 Joseph Koerner, “Icon as Iconoclash”, in Iconoclash, p. 183. 29 As Koerner puts it: “Religion becomes negation in infinite regress: the chosen people scourged, their redeemer scourged by them, they scourged by his people, the Christians, who, from time to time, in order to renew their faith, will scourge his effigy.” Ibid., 199. 30 Ibid., p. 191 31 Dario Gamboni, The Destruction of Art. Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution (London: Reaktion Books, 1997).
phemous way, which would be inherently religious, or at least directed at specifically religious sensitivities. Instead, such works ask another questions related to the mechanism of representation. Even Andres Serrano’s (1950) well-known and controversial work *Piss Christ*, 1987, itself recently a subject of an iconoclastic act, is according to the artist a study of the "ongoing exploration of the spiritual dimensions of base matter."  

When used in modern art figurative religious motifs become gradually dissociated from positive expression of spirituality and are usually used to critical ends. This tendency is inherited by artists working in the present moment, who recycle religious motifs non-religiously, without endowing them with spiritual meaning. I examine the changing relationships between religion and art starting with the work of Friedrich whose painting redefines art as a religious practice and invested with spiritual meaning. Two distinct tendencies can be observed in this process. The first is associated with liberating the image from figuration; abstract art becomes invested with a positive expression of spirituality. The second tendency is that figurative images, which use religious iconography as visual references to religion, acquire a critical, if not iconoclastic function.  

The reasons for that are many – but one of them is that abstraction liberated from the controversies of the new, modernist style of interpretation of religious iconography can easily host religious and spiritual meanings. In contrast to this tendency, the figurative mode of reference to religion becomes associated with critical or iconoclastic meanings. The religious establishment disliked Emil Nolde’s (1867-1956) painting, himself religious, because of its unusual aesthetics. Artists who were very critical of religion such as Francis Bacon also referred to religious motifs and used religious formats to distinctly critical ends.

The complex relationship between contemporary art and religion has been a subject of different studies that address the issue from a variety of perspectives. Some authors such as Catherine Grenier focus on the way contemporary artists build a new iconography based on a reinterpretation of Christian images; Eleanor Heartney analyses the influence of a particular tradition such as Catholicism on artists’ lives and work. Other authors such as James Elkins address the role and relevance of spirit-
uality in the work of contemporary artists. His book *The Strange Place of Religion and Contemporary Art* is one of the few and most known attempts to analyse this difficult relationship.\textsuperscript{35} He proposes five ways in which contemporary artists engage with religion: the end of religious art; the creation of new faiths; art that is critical of religion; how artists try to burn away religion; unconscious religion. This is a useful distinction that sheds light on some important aspects of the role of religion in contemporary art. However, it takes religion and spirituality as very broad phenomena.

It is significant that the few authors who address the issue of religious motifs in contemporary art such as Eleanor Heartney and Catherine Grenier, focus their analysis on concepts and themes related to the Christian tradition. While Heartney traces the effects of what she calls “incarnational imagination” in the work of American artists in the 1970s and 1980s, Grenier focuses on the evident and less evident presence of motifs and themes with a Christian background in the work of artists in the 1990s. The title of her book *Contemporary Art: Is it Christian?* is suggestive enough. In his book *La mystique de l’art. Art et Christianisme de 1900 à nos jours* Jérôme Cottin offers a discussion of twentieth-century art from a theological perspective and traces the way Christian meanings live on in different guises in artists of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{36}

Sven Lutticken’s *Idols of the Market Modern: Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle* traces religious elements in contemporary culture as underlying the critique of contemporary capitalist society and argues that the legacy of the monotheistic rejection of images and practices of iconoclasm can be seen as present in the work of contemporary artists who adopt iconoclasm as an artistic strategy to attack the society of spectacle.\textsuperscript{37} Lutticken also curated *The Return of Religion and Other Myths* at BAK, Utrecht in 2008. A study by Laura Marks that focuses on analysing a series of correspondences between the fractal ornaments and algorithmic structure of Islamic art, and architecture and computer-based art should also be mentioned. Marks’ analysis establishes correspondences between them, which do not claim a historical determination or relationship.\textsuperscript{38}

Grenier’s central argument concerns a period and issues similar to those I address, but adopts a different perspective. She argues that many artists in the 1990s used and referred to Christian iconography. They share a distinct interest in the status of the human body and in the human condition, which is interpreted in their works

as incarnated, expressing fragility, fallenness and mourning. After a dis-incarnated modernity they propose to reconsider the iconic images of the Christian tradition. Through the re-inscription of religious themes in their work contemporary artists confront themselves with the history of art. However, in a secularised culture, such borrowed images are not neutral. This figurative tendency is in fact a reversal of the models of art itself: insistence on, or depiction of a man without a model, bound to the human condition, which he cannot escape. Grenier relates this motif to a desire to create and contemplate the figure of the counter-hero, the marginal. These themes are present in works that do not necessarily explicitly quote religious motifs. She sees an implicit spiritual or Christian moment beyond the iconoclastic mode of citing religious images, and in this sense a positive spirituality expressed in the works. Such motifs can be found in the work of many contemporary artists. Yet, they do not stand only for a contemporary expression of incarnational motifs, but indicate an elaborate interest in the materiality of the body and the image, the media that artists work with.

Chapter One deals with two central issues with regards to understanding the role of the return of religious motifs in contemporary art. These are the distinction between different “eras” or “regimes” of the image charted by Belting and Rancière, and the important motif of the acheiropoietic image and its survival and transformation in contemporary image-making practices. Chapter Two discusses key aspects and questions concerning the multifaceted relationship between contemporary art and religion, and a number of exhibitions that take religion as their central theme. This is followed by an overview of the ways religious motifs are reused by artists, starting with the painting of Friedrich and finishing with the 1990s in Chapter Three. The overview traces two tendencies: the association of positive expression of spirituality with abstract art and the transformation of religious motifs and images into critically charged entities. Chapters Four through Seven are dedicated to the work of four artists who, in their respective ways and media, recycle religious motifs and iconography, and whose works resonate with, or problematise the motif of the true image. Many of the video installations by Bill Viola restage religious paintings, and refer to the motif of the true image to redefine the issue of truth within of video as a medium that can offer a state of hyper-visibility (Chapter Four). Several installation works by Lawrence Malstaf refer to religious motif as a means to problematise the status of the human body as a medium of images and offer an intriguing contemporary reinterpretation of the idea of the incarnation. Chapter Six focuses on a painting by Victoria Reynolds, which builds

39 Grenier, p. 19. 40 For example Mark Quinn’s work, which involves building a cast of his own head out of his frozen blood Self (1991) or Damien Hirst’s skeleton embedded in a glass cross Rehab is for Quitters (1999) resonate with specifically incarnational motif – the human body of Christ.
a complex texture of references to painting and texts belonging to disparate historical moments. The iconographical references are employed not as images with representational value, but as presentational devices to foreground the infrastructure of the very procedures of showing. Several sculptures by Berlind de Bruyckere, discussed in Chapter Seven, conflate different iconographical references. These interrupted resemblances critically address not only the role of representations of violence massively present throughout the history of the Christian image, but also a set of deeper questions concerning the functioning of the image as a religious medium.