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Aniconism: definitions, examples and comparative perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This introductory essay to this thematic issue on aniconism argues for the value of considering various forms of aniconism side by side. It summarizes briefly the historiography of the terms 'aniconism' and 'aniconic,' noting that they originate in the work of Johannes Adolph Overbeck, who coined the expressions *anikonisch* and *Anikonismus*. It considers current definitions and proposes 'aniconism' be used to denote divine presence without a figural image in religious practice, in the visual arts, and in visual culture more broadly. It then discusses three instances of aniconism from Greek antiquity: the cult of Aphrodite in Paphos, the pillar of Zeus depicted on a 4th-century BCE vase, and the seats of Zeus and Hekate on the island of Chalke. These examples illustrate some of the challenges that face the student of aniconism, particularly the difficulty in assessing the nature of an aniconic monument. The discussion then turns to the manner in which the terms are deployed and understood today. It notes the strong association between aniconism and the earliest phases of a particular visual tradition, the view of aniconism as a lesser mode of denoting divine presence, and the perception that aniconic worship is connected with an increased spirituality. Finally, the article highlights some of the common themes that emerge from the contributions to this thematic issue, including the need to consider various forms of aniconism and to expand the range of phenomena that can be regarded as aniconic.

This thematic issue of *Religion* brings together studies that consider aniconism in a wide range of religious contexts. The articles assembled here were first presented at the *XXIst World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions* in Erfurt, in August 2015. They are concerned with a phenomenon that, as I discuss below, can be broadly defined as the demarcation of divine presence without a figural representation. Yet, they may also raise profound questions regarding the scholarly value of such an enterprise. For what can the historian of religion gain from considering in tandem traditions such as the worship of trees in modern India, the djed-pillar of Osiris, and the biblical prohibitions on depicting the God of the Israelites? Examining together geographically and chronologically divergent religious practices is fraught with methodological pitfalls and intellectual challenges. At the very least, this exercise risks implying that all phenomena clustered under a single heading have a single meaning.

There are, however, strong arguments for considering various forms of aniconism side by side. First, such an examination allows a better grasp of how the words 'aniconic' and 'aniconism' are deployed in various scholarly fields, thereby sharpening our understanding of the ways in which the phenomena here grouped under the common rubric 'aniconism' are understood today. As I discuss below, the comparative approach reveals striking differences in the terms' use. Second, such a project opens the path for productive comparison of the practices and traditions taken in various disciplines as forms of aniconism, and the diverging approaches to these various practices and traditions. Such comparison should entail neither a search for common genealogies nor an *a priori* ranking of sophistication and spiritual qualities;[1] rather, it should alert readers to contrasts between areas of research and to the particularities of their specializations and the presumptions of their individual scholarly fields. At the same time, this comparison could bring to the fore similarities in the tensions that arise around some forms of aniconic worship in widely varied contexts.

The aim of this thematic issue is not to give an overview of aniconism across cultures, a task that would require a much more weighty tome. Indeed, the present volume is far from comprehensive. Our hope in assembling this collection is that it will encourage useful conversations on issues such as the workings of the non-figural as mediators of divine presence, the sensory elements in aniconic forms of worship, how worshippers interpret aniconism, and how different scholars understand it.

Before turning to some initial observations on what can be learned from this comparative perspective, we need to return to the fundamental terms of the discussion, namely, to what we mean by 'aniconic' and 'aniconism.' Let us start by reviewing the terms' origins, historiography and definitions, and by considering their current usage.

'Aniconic' and 'aniconism': historiography and definitions

The terms 'aniconic' and 'aniconism' are familiar from a range of scholarly fields but are found in particular in religious studies, history of art, archaeology, anthropology and media studies. Their ubiquitous use can give the impression that they describe a well-circumscribed category. Yet, as I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Gaifman 2012, 18–22), 'aniconism' was not introduced into modern scholarship as the term for a clearly defined phenomenon that could be identified in an empirical investigation. *Anikonisch* and *Anikonismus* were coined to promulgate a particular perception of the earliest history of Greek art. Johannes Adolph Overbeck (1826–1895), one of Germany's leading classical archaeologists in the 19th century, defined the words in a seminal article of 1864 (Overbeck 1864). Like many others at the time, Overbeck postulated that initially Greek art had had no images and that in primordial times the Greeks had deployed trees, stones, poles, pillars, spears and scepters as symbols of invisible powers. According to Overbeck, in primeval antiquity, representation of the divine had been unfathomable because it was impossible to represent something that was not conceived as having human form.

To describe this presumed primordial era, Overbeck introduced the expressions *anikonisch* and *Anikonismus*, derived from the Greek word *eikon* preceded by the negative

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[1]On approaches to comparison see Smith 1982; Lincoln 1989; Stausberg 2011 and Lincoln 2012, with useful discussion also in Freidenreich 2004, 88–91.

prefix *an*. He defined these two terms as synonyms of the German terms *bildlos* ('image-less') and *Bildlosigkeit* ('imagelessness') (Overbeck 1864, 172). The appearance of the composite *an-eikon* might have mislead readers into assuming that Overbeck chose a term native to the language of the ancient Greeks whose art he discussed in his writings. Yet neither *aneikon* nor any of its derivatives appears in any surviving polytheistic Greek literary and epigraphic texts related to art and religion. The very idea of a non-*eikon* cannot be witnessed in the literature of the ancient Greeks whose religious art Overbeck was studying. Rather, the earliest documented ancestor of *anikonisch* is the Greek word *aneikoniston*, which designates the quality of being not representable. It appears in the work of Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis* I.24.163.6) where it emerges in a highly complex early Christian apologetic and anti-idolatrous argument on the essential impossibility of representing the divine. This early Christian concept that had arisen in relation to arguments about the representation of God was useful to Overbeck's agenda, since it encapsulated a quality he ascribed to the invisible powers that had presumably been worshipped in primordial Greece. Overbeck surmised that by their very nature these unseen forces could not be envisioned as anthropomorphic and hence could not be represented in images; their worship therefore required the use of symbols such as pillars and poles. The terms *anikonisch* and *Anikonismus* served Overbeck's conviction that the lack of images, or imagelessness, in primordial Greece was the consequence of the profound impossibility of representing the supranatural during the initial stages of the development of Greek art.

Anikonisch and *Anikonismus*, words introduced for a specific scholarly agenda in a specific field, have evolved into widely deployed terms. In the second half of the 19th century they were translated and deployed in various fields, not only by scholars of Greek antiquity, and in the first decades of the 20th century they made their way into general books on religion and art. For instance, 'aniconism' appeared in an entry on Indian idols in an American encyclopedia of religion published in 1915 (Crooke 1915, 143), whereas 'aniconisme' can be encountered in an account of Jewish art in a French handbook of medieval art that appeared in 1935 (Réau and Cohen 1935, 97). By the last decades of the 20th century the words were enshrined as technical terms in the study of religion.

Let us turn to these recent definitions. Burkhard Gladigow's entry in the *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (Gladigow 1988) entitled 'Anikonische Kulte' proposes that in aniconic cults 'no "images" are known or accepted as objects of worship, especially not in the form of anthropomorphic images.'[2] A more detailed definition was offered by Tryggve Mettinger as part of his contribution to the debate over aniconism in Israelite religion. According to Mettinger (1995, 19), in aniconic cults 'there is no iconic representation of the deity (anthropomorphic or theriomorphic) serving as the dominant or central cultic symbol, that is, where we are concerned with either (a) an aniconic symbol or (b) sacred emptiness'; The first of these two types can be exemplified by standing stones and was named by Mettinger as 'material aniconism,' whereas the second which he named 'empty space aniconism,' can be exemplified by the empty throne. From Overbeck's vague notions of *bildlos* and *Bildlosigkeit*, *anikonisch* and *Anikonismus* have come to describe particular forms of worship.

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[2]I adopt here Mettinger's English rendition of Gladigow's original definition in German: 'Mit der Bezeichnung 'anikonische Kulte' wird eine Gruppe von Kulten zusammengefaßt, die keine 'Bilder' als Kultobjekte, insbesondere in Form von anthropomorphen Bildern kennen oder zulassen' (Gladigow 1988, 472); Mettinger (1995, 19).

Gladigow's and Mettinger's formulations provide useful analytical tools, particularly for scholars of religion who have full access to a certain setting and are fully informed about worshippers' actions and perceptions of their religious practices. In many cases, however, information is limited, making it difficult to tell whether a given monument qualifies as Gladigow's 'object of worship' or as Mettinger's 'dominant or central cultic symbol.' For this reason, in my study of aniconism in Greek antiquity, I adopted Alfred Gell's anthropological terminology. Gell proposed the phrase 'index of divine presence' to describe a marker that indicates to the worshipper that a divine power is present at a particular site, at least potentially (Gell 1998 , 13–16, 26). This marker's relationship to the divine is analogous to that of smoke to fire; when we see smoke, we assume fire, although the precise cause of smoke can vary dramatically whether it may be a cigarette or a bonfire. Similarly, upon seeing such a marker at a certain location, a worshipper can assume the divine is somehow present, although the precise nature of that presence may be hard to determine. In the context of religious ritual, an index of divine presence is the physical recipient of acts addressed to the deity, such as prayer, gestures of salutation, or the making an offering. Building upon this approach, I have suggested that an aniconic monument is a non-figural index of divine presence (Gaifman 2012, 40–41). I noted, however, that the denotation of divine presence without a figural image does not require the existence of a central cultic monument of the sort postulated by Gladigow's and Mettinger's formulations (Gaifman 2012, 32). Greek antiquity is rich with cases in which worship took place with nothing more than the implements of ritual and/or an altar. In light of the absence of any image of the divinity, such locations surely belong with other forms of aniconic ritual setting.

Thus far I have considered 'aniconic' and 'aniconism' in relation to religious practices, but the notion of a non-*eikon* can be understood more broadly; theoretically, these terms could be used to describe purely non-figural or abstract art. Nonetheless, since the expressions are mostly used in scholarship on religious traditions and from their inception were tied to questions concerning divine representation, in my discussion of Greek aniconism, I used 'aniconism' to describe phenomena related to such representation of the divine. At the same time, I suggested that the term is applicable not only in the context of cult practice, but also for visual imagery in general. For instance, the ancient Greek pictorial repertoire includes instances in which the presence of a divinity is implied rather than clearly indicated through an anthropomorphic or theriomorphic representation. Such cases include depictions of aniconic monuments (see the examples discussed below) or a particular iconographic scheme in which a specific divinity is known to be present but is not depicted in either human or animal form. I noted for example, a series of Greek vases depicting Ajax and Achilles playing dice in which Athena is not represented although she can be understood to be present at the scene (see discussion in Gaifman 2012, 42–44).

Learning from the historiography and historical use of the term, I propose to deploy 'aniconic' to describe a physical object, monument, image or visual scheme that denotes the presence of a divine power without a figural representation of the deity (or deities) involved. Similarly, 'aniconism' can be defined as the denotation of divine presence without a figural image both in religious practice and in imagery and visual culture more broadly.

Usage of the terms 'aniconic' and 'aniconism'

Moving on from historiography and definitions, let us consider some cases in which 'aniconic' and 'aniconism' can be applied. I turn to instances from Greek antiquity, whose art was the subject of the writings by Overbeck for which the terms were conceived. These examples also reveal some of the challenges that incidences of aniconism pose. We begin with a Cypriot copper coin from the reign of Emperor Vespasian that depicts a conical object within an oblong quadrangular structure (see Figure 1). Archaeological evidence, similar Cypriot issues, and ancient accounts together confirm that our particular coin depicts renowned object of worship at the sanctuary of Aphrodite in Paphos, a site known as her home and birthplace (see Maier and Karageorghis 1984; and further on the site and the stone of Aphrodite, Gaifman 2012, 169–180). The most compelling description of this holy place is found in the writings of Tacitus. The well-known Roman historian asserted that in this shrine '*simulacrum deae non effigie humana*' ('the image of the goddess was not in human form'). Additionally, he noted that the deity was represented by a 'circular mass that is broader at the base and rises like a turning-post to a small circumference at the top' (Tacitus, *Histories* 2.3).

We can surmise that at least during the Roman era, if not much earlier, an aniconic cult existed at the Cypriot sanctuary of Aphrodite in Paphos. This example corresponds with the modern definitions of aniconism supplied by Gladigow and Mettinger, for all evidence suggests that the local marker of the divinity's presence was a conical stone. A contextual approach to this example helps us assess the place of the sanctuary and its aniconic monument within its own ritual landscape. Whereas from a Greek and Greco-Roman perspective the Paphian cult is unusual in its aniconism and its lack of a figural statue of the deity, from a local Cypriot perspective, the shrine of Aphrodite in Paphos is not particularly striking, for it resembles other sanctuaries on the island at which a stone appears to have been a focal point of ritual (see e.g., Sjöqvist 1932). Additionally, coins such as that in our example show that the non-figural object became a recognizable symbol of Paphos, for while other
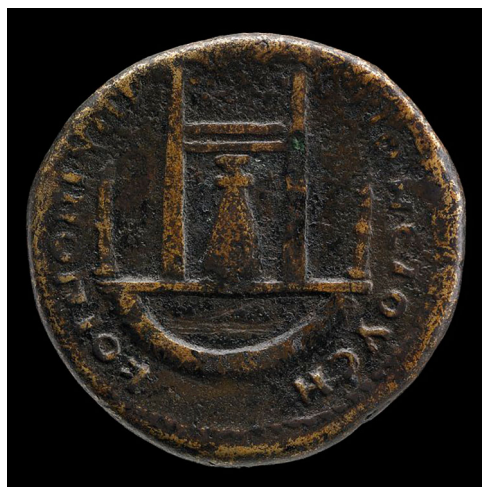
Figure 1. Reverse of Coin of Vespasian showing Shrine of Aphrodite in Paphos. Copper. 75–76 CE, Cyprus. London, British Museum, 1862,0615.1, AN987593001. ©Trustees of the British Museum.

localities in the Greco-Roman world minted depictions of figural statues of deities on their coinage, the people of Paphos chose a non-figural object as their emblem.

The information we can learn about the Cypriot cult of Aphrodite is illuminating, yet it also illustrates a fundamental challenge for our assessment of an aniconic cult: even if we can identify an example of an aniconic object, we may not be able to establish its significance in the eyes of worshippers. In the example of the Cypriot cult of Aphrodite in Paphos, we cannot know how participants in the rites at the site perceived the conical stone. Did pilgrims to Paphos see the stone as an embodiment of the deity? Did they hold it to be more venerable than the more familiar figural statues of the goddess of love? Like Tacitus, we have only an outside perspective. Baffled by the choice of object for the sanctuary's primary focus, we are reminded of the Roman historian's assertion *set ratio in obscure*, 'but the reason is obscure.'

I turn now to a painting on a vase from the 4th-century BCE (see Figure 2(a)) that attracted the attention of Overbeck, who upon close examination noted that it includes a very interesting aniconic monument (Ritschl 1866, 801–802). The scene features the pouring of a libation onto an altar before a pillar inscribed with the name 'Zeus' in the genitive case. The depicted pillar, whose label asserts that it belongs to the Father of the Gods, functions as the focal point of the ritual shown in the scene and can be identified as a marker of divine presence. (For more detailed discussion see Gaifman 2009 and Gaifman 2012, 262–267). Unlike the coin from Cyprus, however, the vase cannot be used as evidence for the reconstruction of a cultic reality. It depicts a particular mythological event, namely, the moments prior to the chariot race between Pelops and King

Figure 2. Apulian panathenaic amphora showing Pelops and Oinomaos at the pillar of Zeus, attributed to the Varrese Painter; ca. 360–330 BCE. London, British Museum, 1843,0724.2. ©Trustees of the British Museum. (a) Detail of Apulian panathenaic amphora showing Pelops and Oinomaos at the pillar of Zeus, attributed to the Varrese Painter; ca. 360–330 BCE. London, British Museum, 1843,0724.2. ©Trustees of the British Museum.

Oinomaos held in the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia. According to the story, fearing the oracle that once his daughter married he would no longer be king and would lose his life, Oinomaos challenged all his daughter's suitors to a chariot race and, trusting that the horses he had received from Ares would assure his triumph, he made the marriage conditional on victory in the competition. The vase portrays the moments prior to the pivotal race in which King Oinomaos lost to the young suitor Pelops. The king, shown as the bearded figure extending a libation bowl, makes a libation to Zeus. The king makes the offering not knowing that he is about to lose to Pelops, who is also depicted on the vase, on the other side of the pillar.

In this case, the decision to depict an aniconic pillar is especially telling. The same mythological scene is witnessed on other Late Classical vases as well as on the east pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia from ca. 470 BCE, but in other such depictions the Father of the Gods is shown as anthropomorphic, whereas this vase portrays the ritual that took place prior to the famous race as directed toward an aniconic monument of Zeus. The painting articulates a particular 4th-century BCE vision of the site, with the suggestion that in the earliest phases of Olympia's history a simple pillar marked the presence of Zeus (further on the meaning of the pillar of Zeus in this scene, see Gaifman 2012, 262–267). This vase allows us to understand how aniconic monuments were perceived in the Late Classical era and is one among a number of instances in which aniconism is associated with primordial antiquity, an association also maintained by Overbeck in his history of the development of Greek art. Although, as I have argued in my book, evidence from the time of the rise of the Greek *polis*, in ca. 700 BCE, suggests that figural monuments of cults coexisted with some form of aniconism, even in antiquity aniconic forms were thought to have preceded figural representations of the divine.

We can relocate now to the small island of Chalke, which lies off the coast of Rhodes (see Figure 3). In the late-19th century, Friedrich Hiller von Gaertringen visited the slopes of the acropolis of the island, and as he climbed up the hill he came across a boulder with two rock-cut seats. Upon close inspection, he noticed that each of the two seats was labeled

Figure 3. Rock-cut seats of Zeus and Hekate, Chalke. Photo: Milette Gaifman.

with a divinity's name in the genitive case; the name of Zeus appears on the left and that of Hekate on the right (see Hiller von Gaertringen 1895; for detailed discussion Gaifman 2012, 163–169). Given the lack of external evidence or any archaeological record from the site, we cannot now know whether the rock-cut seats were incorporated in rituals, and whether an aniconic cult existed on the slopes of the acropolis of Chalke. In this case, we cannot deploy Gladigow's and Mettinger's formulations, for we have insufficient information to reconstruct the role that the seats might have had in religious practices. Caution is very necessary, for even if rituals were staged here, they could have incorporated the veneration of portable images of the gods, which might have been used alongside or in combination with the rock-cut seats.

Nonetheless, the inscribed names of Zeus and Hekate suggest that the rock with its vacancies could have functioned as an index of the gods' presence, telling visitors that the two deities could be present at the site, at least potentially and/or on particular occasions. This observation then suggests that when empty, the pair of seats were an example of what Mettinger termed 'empty space aniconism.' But with the vacancies carved into a particular boulder on the slopes of the acropolis, was then the entire rock regarded as the seat of the gods, with the carved vacancies serving merely as visual cues to the rock's unique qualities? This case shows that while Mettinger's classifications 'empty space aniconism' and 'material aniconism' can be useful, particularly for a taxonomic project, distinguishing between the two categories is not necessarily straightforward. Such distinctions may indeed have been entirely foreign to the culture and religious traditions of the specific cases under consideration. When ancient worshippers approached the seats of Zeus and Hekate on the island of Chalke, they may not have even thought to differentiate between the vacant spaces and the boulder into which they were carved.

The case of the rock-cut seats from Chalke highlights another profound difficulty in our consideration of aniconism: where do we draw the line between the aniconic and the figural? Arguably, the rock-cut seats are not aniconic, for their human scale and resemblance to mortals' thrones imply that their potential occupants are anthropomorphic. Although no figural images of Zeus and Hekate are present, the spaces may be taken as alluding to the divinities' human form. There is no simple answer to this quandary. As I have elaborated elsewhere (Gaifman 2012, 35–38), Greek religious art is rich in forms and modes of denoting divine presence that are neither strictly fully anthropomorphic nor completely non-figural – here we can usefully cite the example of the *herms* that are pillars with a figural head and a phallus. Furthermore, an extreme position holds that even a standing stone can be said to resemble the human figure, so that even the aniconic can be thought of as figural (see Goodman 1976, 34–39 and Gell 1998, 131). Against this argument, however, we can assert that clear distinctions *can* be made between that which resembles the human form and that which does not (see Brinker 1983, Mitchell 1986, and Mitchell 1994). Such distinctions are particularly visible in the context of Greek art, in which anthropomorphism was certainly dominant, but figural modes of representation were only one among several methods of marking the presence of the divine. The latter included not only such *herms*, but also, as the focus of various cults, *phalloi*, the *tropaia* of Zeus Tropaios, namely, mannequins made of the conquered enemy's armor, and the Dionysiac poles with masks. I have referred to this broad range, running from the fully figural to the aniconic, as the 'spectrum of iconicity' and have suggested that

the various forms of aniconism can be described in turn as the 'spectrum of the aniconic' (Gaifman 2012, 13 and 44–45). As Mikael Aktor discusses in detail in his contribution to this volume, which focuses on Hindu practices, the notion of a spectrum of the aniconic can be applied to various other religious traditions.

Thus far, we have considered how the terms 'aniconic' and 'aniconism' might be applied in specific instances from Greek antiquity, while keeping in mind their historiography and formal definitions. These same terms have also been deployed in ways that do not necessarily accord with any of the definitions we have seen so far. Take for instance, Mauro Perra's account of the menhirs of prehistoric Sardinia. Here, the adjective 'aniconic' appears as synonymous with 'non-figural' (Perra 2014). It is used to describe the earliest form of the stones, which preceded the proto-anthropomorphic and anthropomorphic menhirs. Unlike Overbeck's concerns with the history of Greek religious art, Gladigow's interest in the definition of an 'iconic cult' or Mettinger's questions regarding Israelite forms of worship, Perra is not focused specifically on cult practices or the perception of the divine among the inhabitants of prehistoric Sardinia. Rather, he deploys the term 'aniconic' merely to describe the earliest phase of a particular tradition, which is also the stage with no anthropomorphic imagery. Here 'aniconic' has come to designate an early phase in an assumed development from non-anthropomorphic to anthropomorphic. Perra's discussion echoes Overbeck's scheme in so far as he uses 'aniconic' to describe standing stones and lack of figural representations in a primeval era, yet in contrast to his German predecessor, he does not engage with any issues pertaining to religious perceptions, or ideologies.

On other occasions, aniconism is associated with ideological and theological meanings. It can be cast either negatively or positively, indicative of both greater or lesser spiritual qualities and venerability. For instance, Marshall Soules takes aniconism to be a convention that requires spiritual beings not be represented by human hands (Soules 2015, 39). For Soules, aniconism does not describe a particular non-figural form but merely stands for the prohibitions against the representation of the divine in various religions. In his highly subjective discussion, Muslim adherents of aniconism are described negatively, as vandals who reject the veneration of icons and are driven by fear of idolatry. In stark contrast, Laura Marks asserts,

> Art is aniconic when the image shows us that what we do not see is more significant than what we do. In both Islamic art and new media art, the most important activity takes place at a level prior to the perceptible image. (Marks 2010, 5)

Marks's understanding of what makes art aniconic is quite different from the definitions we have seen thus far. The label 'aniconic' is applied in light of an object's impact on its beholder rather than its actual form. According to Marks, art is aniconic when it demonstrates to viewers that the invisible is more significant than what they perceive. Her scheme implies a value judgment, for what she describes as aniconic does more than tell of the existence of invisible powers; it makes the invisible more valuable than the visible. Aniconism here is associated with a far more complex, or possibly more spiritual, experience of vision and perception.

These three examples illustrate that 'aniconic' and 'aniconism' can be deployed as key terms, yet with meanings and values that can vary dramatically. Their usage does not always conform to the existing definitions provided by historians of religion. The underlying

assumption is that 'aniconic' stands for some kind of negation or absence of the 'icon.' How this abstention/avoidance comes about, what the nature of the 'icon' is, and what the extent and motivation of this negation all vary highly. We must be aware of these startling differences as we consider some of the observations that can be made on the basis of this collection of articles.

Preliminary observations from a comparative perspective[3]

What does this group of essays offer its readers? First, it presents new insights on the place of aniconism within the broader context of the study of religion, in particular for the material traits of religious practice. The collection reveals the sheer range of ways of marking divine presence that can be described as 'aniconic,' found not merely amongst different peoples and regions, but also, and most strikingly, within single systems of belief.

The collection starts in so-called prehistoric times, or more precisely with a critical review of global art-like production during the middle and upper Paleolithic 11 000–300 000 years ago (Bednarik 2017). In this vast material aniconic elements exceed in great numbers the documented iconic forms. Generally, these aniconic elements appear to be more complex and meaningful in evoking the sacred, when compared with the rarer figurative paleoart: 'whereas in figurative or iconic symbolism, the connection between referent and referrer is largely via iconicity, the symbolism of non-iconic art is only navigable by possessing the relevant neural "software" furnished by culture.' Functioning as transmitters of cultural information such aniconic designs are therefore seen by Bednarik as exograms, 'externalized memory traces,' in non-written, graphic forms. As an attempt to understand the relationship between aniconic and iconic palaeoart Bednarik engages with anthropological material where we find both modes of representation, for instance in parts of Australia and among the Jarawas of the Andaman Islands. In these societies the tendency has been to regard aniconic art as 'the more weighty, mature and sacred mode' of the two. This may explain the fact that evidence from upper palaeolithic caves such as fingertip strokes, footprints and hand stencils indicate that the figural cave art was the work of adolescents, 'a ludic expression of juveniles,' rather than performed by adults. The theory 'may sound frivolous,' but is backed up by development psychology and cognitive science. Interestingly, these three propositions by Bednarik – the exogrammatic properties of the aniconic designs, the more complex, weighty and sacred mode of these designs compared to figurative palaeoart, and the distinction between juvenile figurative art and adult aniconic representations – may indicate a possible connection between initiation rites, aniconic designs (passed on during initiation) and esoteric knowledge.

Many of the contributions in this collection of essays examine the coexistence of figurative and aniconic representations within a single cultic framework as a matter of deliberate choice. Jørgen Podemann Sørensen (2017) compares three different representational modes in the ancient Egyptian cult of Osiris, an anthropomorphic, a semi-iconic and an aniconic mode. Importantly, Sørensen emphasizes the ritual contexts of all three modes: 'we must […] adopt a ritual perspective, if we want to understand iconic and aniconic representations of gods as means to secure their ritual presence.' The divine presence,

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[3]This section was co-written by Mikael Aktor and Milette Gaifman.

'the presence of invisible beings,' can only be a ritual presence since 'any act that claims to affect or involve an entity beyond its straightforward physical or communicative reach is by definition a ritual.' This ritual, representational mode of images must be distinguished from an informative mode. Scholars may be misled to understand the figurative images in the Egyptian books of the netherworld, including the anthropomorphic image of Osiris, as theological information, but it is more likely that the images refer 'to the execution or the bringing to pass of the content of the image,' thus, that the images are designed as a ritual enactment of the events of the netherworld. The essence of all three representational modes is their character of potential reality. This becomes particularly clear with the second mode of representation, the semi-iconic mode exemplified by the corn-Osiris, which consisted of a mold in the form of Osiris that was filled with sand into which corn was sown and watched growing. This is an example of a remarkable marker of divine presence that combines a visual representation and a natural vegetal element. This semi-iconic object, 'half image, half reality,' generated an epiphanic experience which emphasized the tangible powers of the god. Likely less familiar is the aniconic Djed-pillar of Osiris that, as Sørensen discusses, coexisted with the other two representational modes. This form of Osiris is part of a ritual, 'raising the Djed-pillar,' that seems to enact the regeneration of Osiris. Sørensen finally compares all three modes. The movement from the anthropomorphic image of the Osiris mythology to the semi-iconic corn-Osiris is an alleviation of the 'iconic grip' that broadens the perspective, and the aniconic Djed-pillar is free of any iconic restriction and can be seen as representing 'Osiris at large.'

Michael Shenkar (2017) presents us with a divided pre-Islamic Iranian world. Both medieval Muslim accounts and archeological evidence confirm a division between an aniconic West (corresponding roughly to the modern Islamic Republic of Iran) and an anthropomorphic East (Central Asia). Like in Vedic India, the western Iranians perceived their deities as anthropomorphic yet worshipped them in various non-anthropomorphic forms, the fire altar with the open ritual fire being the most central focus of worship. However, with the Greek Hellenistic influence spreading from Bactria (present-day Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) during the Seleucid and post-Seleucid periods, anthropomorphic worship became increasingly dominant in the East. The division in representational styles eventually became parallel to the Hellenic influence, strong in the East, weak in the West. Whereas the West remained predominantly aniconic (and as such a normative predecessor of present-day Zoroastrian worship in Iran and India), in the East Hellenistic anthropomorphic representations blended with the 'pre-Greek' aniconic tradition. Thus, 'notions of a simple replacement of the "primitive" aniconic cults with more "advanced" anthropomorphic images are highly problematic.'

The three monotheistic traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are known for their more or less strained attitudes to anthropomorphic figural imagery, and discussions of 'aniconism' in the scholarship of these traditions usually revolve around the extent to which it is recommended, allowable or prohibited to produce such imagery. Thus, 'aniconism' in the debates about these traditions normally signifies *anti-iconism* rather than the use of aniconic forms as markers of divine presence. This is an example of how scholars of different religious traditions assign different connotations to the same term and therefore an important semantic distinction for the comparative scholarship of aniconism.

Hans J. Lundager Jensen (2017) asks the question why in the second half of the first millennium BCE when the texts of the Bible were written this anti-iconic attitude

became an important issue. To answer this question Hans J. L. Jensen emphasizes the intercultural situation of the Isralites as a small people surrounded by polytheistic, iconophile nations. Polytheism and image cults went together with other more spectacular practices such as large festivals and processions where people were united in collective and noisy mass excitement (the *effervescence*, 'which to Durkheim was the whole point of religious rituals'). From this perspective anti-iconism became an antidote to the attraction of letting oneself get swallowed up by these festivals and thereby a protection of Israelite ethnic identity centered on the cult of the non-iconic Yahweh. Jensen's analysis of the texts reveals three different rhetorical modes, all aimed at helping Israelites resist the attraction. One is the authoritarian mode of the Biblical command not to worship images. More significant are the two remaining modes, the aesthetic mode of 'disgustification' and the cognitive mode of ridiculing. The idols are 'detestable' and 'filthy,' and to confuse gods with dolls is a cognitive scandal and utter stupidity. Together these rhetorical tools were means of installing a 'small mental program' that could activate the 'religiousethnic immune system.' This Biblical 'aniconism,' with its pietistic insistence 'that religion should be the opposite of fun,' was also the 'possible birth of religious seriousness,' and as such it is seen by H. J. L. Jensen as a product of the so-called 'axial age' of religious evolution where ascetic training programs both bodily and intellectually started to replace earlier fertility-oriented cults.

The lack of anthropomorphic representations of God or Christ during the first early centuries of Christianity may seem a continuation of the Biblical anti-iconistic propaganda. But Robin Jensen's analysis of early Christian debates regarding images (Jensen 2017) reveals these discussions had an apologetic purpose in the face of a polytheistic environment, and that for this reason they were grounded in the classical philosophical discourse and accounts of ancient Roman aniconism rather than the Old Testament. Only later when a polytheism was no longer dominant did the arguments against images start to build on Old Testament scriptures. Central to Robin Jensen's argument is a notable distinction between narrative images and images used and venerated in worship. The former, such as scenes from the Bible on sarcophagi, were never a target of anti-iconism, and the argument against the latter was based on classical philosophers (often Plato), for instance the *aneikoniston* argument of Clement of Alexandria about the impossibility of representing the invisible God in visible form mentioned in the first part of this article.

A similar distinction between narrative and iconic images is relevant for the relation between the figural images in Umayyad palaces analyzed by Ali (2017) and the *Bilderverbot* in mosques and other sacred buildings. Earlier scholarship has typically presented that relation as a strong contrast between the 'normative aniconism' in the sacred buildings and the 'decadent,' 'unabashedly figural decoration' of the frescos, mosaics and sculptures of the Umayyad palaces. But Ali's sophisticated analysis of the vivid figural frescos of the Umayyad Qusayr 'Amra palace in Jordan wants to question and nuance that dichotomy. Ali applies the concept of 'the life of forms' to show how forms such as a lying person, a sitting person resting his head in his hand, a palm tree, or a drinking jug – are replicated in different motives: the story of Dionysus and sleeping Ariadne, Quranic version of the Christian nativity story, the apocryphal story of the tired Mary and the bending date palm, and the birth of Apollo. Motives are not depictions of isolated narratives. Rather the use of similar compositions of forms evoked meaning by allusion to other forms

(what Ali calls 'formal signification') in such a way that different motives influenced the viewer's perception of each of them, and a sharp contrast between secular and religious motives therefore becomes misplaced. This is not inconsistent with Islamic theology. According to this theology – a 'route of indirection' – God is invisible but can be witnessed indirectly through signs. These are not cult images – they 'do not make present what they purport to represent.' But they are signs of God's visible works. The normative aniconism of the sacred buildings and the figurative art of the palaces are therefore best understood 'as different but contemporary expressions of commitment to certain commonly held principles, including belief in an invisible and undivided God.'

Jay Johnston's article (2017) broadens our understanding of the varied forms of aniconic religious objects in another direction. Johnston considers stone worship in Scotland from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, calling attention to small non-figural objects, in the form of amulets, that were venerated, and thereby proposing that we expand the range of religious practices that can be described as aniconic. In the case of amulets, the motivations for use are less concerned with figural representation but more with 'the specific agency and efficacy of the material and its ascription to particular deities.' These ascriptions would be determined by the qualities, colors or shapes of certain stones, and thus, 'their very materiality was the medium that enabled relation (aesthetic and ontological) with the spiritual realm.' Their selection was also a function of the parallel close connections between stones and landscapes, and deities and landscape. The subtle and ephemeral materiality of the elves and fairies, located at particular spots in the landscape, was made present, manipulable and transportable through the tangible materiality of the stones. Clearly, the agency of these amulets is an emergent property rather than an integral one. In order to reflect the numerous sources and connections – locations, shapes, visual properties and beliefs – that emerge as stone-agency, Johnston proposes the notion of the 'trans-aniconic.' With this formulation Johnston wants to point at 'the material cultures role as *medium*: an active (not passive) site of transitive exchange between human and other-than-human agencies.'

South Asian traditions offer a rich material of cults that like those in ancient Egypt and Greece, but still alive, worship their gods in both iconic and aniconic forms. Davis (2017) presents us with the various forms of the cult of Śiva known from the Śaiva Siddhānta school of Śaivism both through normative texts, medieval poetry and present-day temple practices. Clearly the choice of form is deliberate and determined both by theological considerations and the specific practice. The central object of worship is the aniconic Śiva-*liṅga*, 'an upright round-topped cylindrical shaft set into a pedestal.' An abstract, aniconic object without parts like arms and legs, is considered the best to represent the transcendent aspect of Supreme Śiva, and therefore it is this form that is the central object of worship in the sanctums of Śiva temples. This does not exclude the anthropomorphic images of Śiva elsewhere in the temple, and his transportable procession imagery that together reflect his many roles and rich mythology. Transitions between the two options are also common as when a single iconographic attribute of the anthropomorphic Śiva, an 'aniconic synecdoche' like his trident, becomes a marker of divine presence in its own right. This 'multiplicity of presence' together makes for a coherent and meaningful network of forms for the worshiper. Davis applies the concept of 'translucency' to capture these relationships between different forms: Worshiping the aniconic Śiva-*liṅga* 'opens out into a broader vista in which one may also see other aspects of the wholeness

of God's being.' This concept is not a matter of scholarly abstraction but a devotional way of seeing that is illustrated heuristically on popular god posters and expressed in poems and hymns. The message here as in other of the contributions of this thematic issue is that the connectedness of different forms 'tends to dissolve any firm distinction we might make between iconic and aniconic, within a broader theology' of a god's divine pervasiveness.

The worship of elements of the landscape like, mountains, rivers and trees incites a puzzling difficulty for studying aniconism. Are these elements aniconic forms of deities that are originally anthropomorphic, or are the anthropomorphic forms the secondary forms of gods that are truly aniconic? What is the true form of a god? According to the informants that David Haberman has spoken to during his field work on the worship of the Neem tree in Northern India there is no doubt that the tree is the original manifestation of the goddess: 'the worship of the aniconic tree is paramount and prior to the worship of any temple image that was added later' (Haberman 2017). But interestingly, aniconic and anthropomorphic elements blend in the cult; trees are dressed in red cloth like the image in the temple and applied with facemasks painted with the facial features of the anthropomorphic goddess. A parallel worship of stones from the Govardhan mountain, considered an embodied form of Kṛṣṇa, exhibits the same traits. The stones are often painted with the facial features of Kṛṣṇa and adorned with fine cloth and jewels like the anthropomorphic statue in the temple. This anthropomorphization is a result of the devotional worship modeled on the intimate personal relationships between humans. In Hindu worship communication with the god is through eye contact and service. The eyes on the face masks and on the painted stones and the offering of food and incense placed before the tree or stone make this possible. Haberman refers to various studies within anthropology and cognitive science that confirm the natural tendency for seeing iconicity in aniconicity, most typically in the form of facial features.

As already noted, Aktor's article (2017) presents an account of different types of aniconic representations within Hindu religion; more than that, it also proposes a way of classifying and organizing these various modes within a general spectrum of aniconism that comprises a systematic continuum from elements of the landscape like trees and mountains to anthropomorphic temple images via various categories of aniconic artifacts and metonymic iconographic attributes. This idea, in a way, sums up a central theme of the articles in this thematic issue, the fluidity of aniconic and iconic visual features. In addition, it engages with two fundamental distinctions: First, the difference between form and material, for instance, between a therio*morphic* image and a sacred living animal that is seen as a manifestation rather than as a representation of the divine, and second, the difference between aniconicity, namely the mere existence of the non-figural, and aniconism, namely a normative concept. The empirical material of the article is a field study of the Hindu Pañcāyatana Pūjā, which is a worship of five gods in the shape of five different stones. The worship is characterized by a movement between aniconic, anthropopathic and anthropomorphic ritual modes.

When read together the eleven articles in this thematic issue reveal certain common threads pertaining to aniconism. Among them we have noted the following issues:

- *Terminology*. As was pointed out earlier in this article, the term 'aniconism' is used differently by scholars of different traditions. Notably, in the scholarship of the three so-called Abrahamic religions, aniconism tends to signify a specific attitude to images

based on the theological idea that God is invisible and neither can nor should be represented in iconic form (H. J. L. Jensen; R. Jensen; Ali). 'Anti-iconism' might be a more precise term for this attitude. A distinction between 'aniconicity' (the fact of the non-figural) and 'aniconism' (a normative program of visuality) was also suggested (Aktor).

- *Fluidity.* 'Aniconism is rarely, if ever, absolute' (Aktor). Thus, the study of aniconicity and aniconism in this thematic issue has turned out to be a study of mutual relations between different representational modes. Time and again, aniconism is viewed as a mode of piety in dialogue and/or relationship with other forms of worship, particularly the veneration of semi-figural and fully figural monuments (Sørensen; Davis; Haberman; Aktor).

- *Historical developments and aniconism as a deliberate choice.* As noted above, the modern category of aniconism was introduced in the 19th century as a counterpart to the adoration of figural monuments, as a form of worship that was assumed to have *preceded* the veneration of figural imagery in ancient Greece (Gaifman 2012). But even the prehistoric material presented by Bednarik includes cultures where aniconic and iconic imagery coexisted, although the former by far seems to have exceeded the latter on a global basis. The worship of elements in the landscape (Haberman) and aniconic markers of supernatural agency or religious knowledge on such elements may well be an archaic form of local religious practices. Still, if that is the case, it need not make the later use of aniconic representations a mere survival without purposeful intention, even when changes in the cultural environment reconfigure the aesthetic repertoire (Shenkar).

- *Form and material.* The semi-iconic corn-Osiris (Sørensen) which combined two types of representational modes, one through form (the shape of the mould) and the second through material (the sprouting and growing corn), highlights important issues of scholarly approach and language. Our vocabulary generally takes the first representational mode of representation for granted in terms like anthropo*morphic* and therio*morphic* (Aktor). Yet, the second type is also significant. In this example, the natural growth of the corn gave physical presence to the god's regenerative powers. Similarly, a stone (Johnston) or a tree (Haberman) are worshipped as natural manifestations of the deities they make present not because of their visual similarity (form) but because of their existence, of merely being what they are (material). Still, the papers also highlight a recurring search for some visual elements that connect natural matter with recognizable form, as when categorizing a stone according to the similarities between its visual features and the iconographic markers of a deity (Johnston; Aktor).

- *Narrative and iconic imagery.* Aniconic objects are constantly compared with figural and/or anthropomorphic images. We need, however, to distinguish between an informative use of images and a ritual, representational use (Sørensen). Likewise, the attitude to such images depends on whether they are used to illustrate a narrative or used as objects of worship (Robin Jensen). The latter use is more or less constrained particularly in so-called Abrahamic religions. Signs that 'make present what they purport to represent' (Ali) should not be worshiped according to the Old Testament (H. J. L. Jensen), the early Christian theologians (R. Jensen), and the normative aniconism of Islam (Ali). It is quite the opposite in the Greek, Egyptian and South Asian material.

- *Aniconism and degrees of sacredness.* Can Bednarik's observation that aniconic designs had the status as 'the more weighty, mature and sacred mode' of representation compared to figural images be generalized? That of course will depend on a much larger comparative study than what is presented in this thematic issue. Aniconic objects may be ambiguous like the seats of Zeus and Hekate mentioned in the first part of this introduction. The idea is also in danger of being a pretext for personal religious preferences of scholars just as it was for Johannes Adolph Overbeck. Still, the Djed-pillar was seen as representing 'Osiris at large' (Sørensen), the rejection of figural representations of God in the Old Testament was proposed as the 'possible birth of religious seriousness' (H. J. L. Jensen), the undifferentiated form of the aniconic Śiva-liṅga was understood as a more fitting representation of the transcendent aspect of Supreme Śiva within the Śaiva Siddhānta school (Davis), and devotees of goddess Śītalā considered the Neem trees the primary manifestations of the goddess, while her image in the temple was regarded as a later secondary representation (Haberman).
- *Aniconism and anthropomorphization.* The considerations of some definite relation between aniconism and degrees of sacredness must, however, be weighed against the fact that visible anthropomorphization of the divine appears in some contexts to have been the more effective ritual mode than aniconism. Especially devotional practices of worship tend to transform aniconic objects of worship into anthropomorphic ones (Haberman; Aktor). That finding is a helpful warning to avoid unfounded generalizations about the efficacy and agency of modes of worship across varied religious traditions.
- *Theories about aniconism.* The value ascribed to a particular aniconic tradition is shaped to a great degree by perceptions and theories about that tradition. The group of articles reveals the usefulness of first-hand commentaries and testimonia that can be far more nuanced and complex than anticipated (Aktor; Haberman). The realia of practice and worshippers' perspectives may not fit scholarly paradigms, or notions of strict binary oppositions. One ought to be warned against any overgeneralizations, especially when no first-hand testimonia is available.

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