Introduction: On the Relations of Religion and Images

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ABSTRACT   In this special issue, we explore the role of depictions and images in religious traditions from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, covering a broad spectrum of religious traditions from Asia to Europe. Our focus is on examining the range of religious attitudes towards images, which can range from indifference (aniconism) to admiration (iconism) to outright rejection and destruction (anti-iconism). Our contributors discuss the hypothesis that religious attitudes towards images often fluctuate between these three categories, and that it is not possible to strictly classify a particular religious tradition as either hostile or friendly towards images. This introduction provides an overview of the central and complex concepts that form the basis of the individual contributions, including representation, icons, media and materiality, and an/iconism.

KEYWORDS   Religion and images, iconoclasm, iconism, aniconism, materiality, media, representation

Introduction: On the Relations of Religion and Images

The study of religion is concerned with a specific form of *Bildwissenschaft* (visual studies; science of images) that is not restricted to the examination of images transporting a particular kind of knowledge. Here, images are both media and objects of religious meaning. Furthermore, within the religious domain, knowledge about images inevitably yields practical outcomes. The dominant response to inquiries concerning the religious significance of images

[1]

influences attitudes towards them, encompassing a wide range that extends from destructive aggressiveness and conscious indifference to outright worship and veneration.

In this collaborative publication, we consider the veneration, toleration, rejection, and destruction of depictions/images in religious traditions from a theoretical and empirical perspective (including a historical dimension), covering a broad spectrum of ancient and contemporary religious traditions between Asia and Europe. Our systematic approach is grounded in separate case studies located in different epochs and regions as we aim to abductively expand on and modify theoretical assumptions on the nature and role of depictions/images in the religious field. [2]

Basing our research on the overall assumption regarding the general relevance of depictions/images in religious traditions, the focus lies, firstly, on the examination of the spectrum of religious attitudes towards images, ranging from an indifferent attitude, including absence of images (*aniconism*), via a positive attitude (*iconism*) to the rejection and even destruction of images (*anti-iconism*). Secondly, the contributors in this publication discuss the hypothesis that religions usually oscillate between an indifferent, an anti-iconic, and an iconic attitude: as opposed to common stereotypes, it is not possible to strictly classify a particular religious tradition as either hostile or favorably inclined towards images. Thirdly, the different states of religions between iconism, aniconism, and anti-iconism are examined and discussed based on historical and empirical materials involving inter- or intra-religious contact. This comparative approach allows for building a broader foundation for the conceptualization of the different phenomena. It also enables a better understanding of aniconism, iconism, and anti-iconism as driven by processes of contact between religious traditions. The religious significance and relevance of the question about images often necessitate the convergence of at least two religious perspectives, which collectively shape one's attitude towards an image. This image then becomes a potential subject of religious communication, manifesting, for instance, in objects, codes of behavior, or dogma. [3]

In the present volume, the contributors employ the following working definition of *religion*, which is based on the theory of Niklas Luhmann: "[R]eligion has differentiated itself from its environment during socio-cultural evolution that is, in turn, related to—and this means: differentiated from—its mental, organic, and physical environment. Religion is a particular kind of social communication that (a) ultimately copes with otherwise undetermined contingency (b) by means of the distinction between immanence and transcendence in its general understanding of dealing with the absent under present conditions" (Krech 2019, 7). [4]

Iconism, aniconism, and anti-iconism are all phenomena of *relational religion* (on the concept, see Krech 2019). Above all, this means that phenomena of the religious field are defined in relation to other religious constituents and other social and cultural facts outside the religious field. Within CERES,[1] scholars examine expressions of relational religion with regard to four analytically distinguished dimensions of the religious field. However, to avoid creating too many—possibly misleading—axiomatic presuppositions in the abductive alternation between deduction and induction, academic research should begin with only a few basic formal and general assumptions. What is today described as religion arises and takes effect within four fundamental dimensions of the dialectic processes between the psychological and the social: [5]

- through *knowledge*, which provides orientation; [6]

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- through *experiences,* which generate evidence;
- through *actions,* which serve the planning, regulation, and attainment of aims;
- through handling the *relatedness to matter* (corporeality and materiality), which influences psychic and social developments.

In religion, all four dimensions always occur simultaneously. For example, actions can only [7] take place based on the knowledge available, and experiences generate knowledge. However, it makes sense analytically to examine the relationship of religion to each of these dimensions to better grasp developments in each of the dimensions and thus, ultimately, to better understand how they interact. Religion provides the dimensions of the dialectic processes between the mental and the social—knowledge, experience, actions, and materiality—with a specific transcendent meaning, and thus it is a special form of dealing with contingency. A surplus value is thus attached to social and cultural circumstances, which they do not enjoy in other forms of treatment. The way in which the transcendent sense is specifically symbolized (temporally, spatially, materially, in terms of shaping actions and cognitions) depends on socio-cultural conditions and is defined in distinction from—meaning: in relation to—other rationalities (Krech 2015, 47).

In the present case, regarding the phenomena of iconism, aniconism, and anti-iconism, the [8] particular relatedness to matter and media in their material aspects seems to be of utmost importance, as religious traditions employing such ideas explicitly refer to problems and questions connected to these phenomena, and thus model experience, knowledge, and actions accordingly. These answers, manifested in the three dimensions of experience, knowledge, and actions, in turn resonate with the fourth, namely the relatedness to matter, thus leading to further stimulation, intensification, and transformation and, as a consequence, together with outside impacts, to a permanent (re-)figuration of phenomena within the religious field and beyond.

In the following, we aim at clarifying some basic concepts that are important for any attempt [9] at systematizing the scholarly approach to the phenomenon of images (in a broad sense) in the religious field.

The Triad Representation-Presence-Presentation

The notions of presentation and representation are closely connected by an ongoing process [10] of interaction. In fact, images that may be called religiously meaningful oscillate between presentation and representation of the divine, not allowing for a clear-cut allocation to one or the other (see, for example, Rüpke 2010, 192). However, some preliminary remarks on the notions are due. Judging from the words themselves, the relationship expressed does not convey some distinction, but rather, repetition (see Boehm 1995, 327) or (re-)contextualization. The interactive process itself is concerned with the phenomenon of presence.

The analysis of this process in the theory of arts has significant results for the explication of [11] images as a religious phenomenon. With reference to the German language, art historian and philosopher Gottfried Boehm, one of the initiators of the *Bildwissenschaft* (science of images), points out the particular meaning of the notion of presence: beholding an image, one might be "captivated by the magic of magnificent paintings and speak about the paintings' unique, more-than-physical 'presence' (German: *Präsenz*). The linguistic usage is vague, but 'presence' seems to mean something more than mere physical 'being-at-hand,' (*Vorhandenheit*); it describes an

enhanced presence (*Gegenwart*) of the image, which reaches beyond historical, referential, or documentary functions" (2012, 15). Now, religiously meaningful images are associated with the distinction of transcendence and immanence, and thus are closely linked to the idea of an enhanced presence or an enhancing presence that transcends a state of mere being-at-hand. Thus, the idea of representation seems to be the answer of presenting the particular presence of something that cannot be presented. According to Boehm, it is an intensified presence that is not some simple reduplication: "Re-presenting is not about presenting something again. It is less and more at once. […] Thus, the prefix 're-' in 're-presentation' means intensification. This intensification adds a surplus to the existence of the depicted" (2012, 17). The intensified surplus concerns the very temporality of the object of depiction (i.e., both the depicted and the depiction). "The representation withdraws the absentee from temporal succession and thereby gives him a place in the world. Re-presentation occurs as presentation. The presence owes its existence again to a special type of 'showing.' […] Therefore we can regard re-presentation as an act of showing, which has a particular temporal dimension at its disposal. Representation has the particular ability to present the represented that was originally subject to the passing of time, as if it were present" (2012, 17). By transcending time, representation thus reintegrates the meaning of an image into the immanent sphere. "The image process, which leads to presence, has a paradoxical structure. Therefore, we cannot mark the beginning and the end of the image process in time. A science of the inner nexus of representation, presentation, and presence is necessarily a science of performance and experience" (2012, 22).

The problem of representation of the religiously meaningful transcendent, which is not de-   [12]
pictable through images, holds a central position in the general history of religion. Therefore, the topic of representation is important both for the study of religion as well as for the history of religion's attitude towards images. It is closely connected to the distinction of transcendence and immanence that provides the main code of religious communication and, accordingly, to the question of how the transcendent can be represented by immanent means. The complexity of religious representation through images goes well beyond the assumption that images are not supposed to be divine but to represent the divine. "Regarding the more abstract case of religion, the paradox of rendering the transcendent immanent and therefore representing it (not only, but also through images) is something that constitutes religion while also being one of its major problems at the same time. The question of the use and the role of images in religion is one example connected to the overall discussion on the interrelation between (*per definitionem* not directly reachable) transcendence and its immanent representation(s) (which enable the communication with transcendence)" (Jurczyk 2018, 106). The word 'representation' is of Latin origin and has a strong mental and imaginative connotation, in the sense of making something present to a reader or an auditorium, or rather, putting something in front of the reader's eyes (see Scheerer 1992, 791). It is thus connected to the rhetorical figure of hypotyposis[2] or *ekphrasis* (see Derhard-Lesieur's contribution in this issue; 2023). Over time, the notion of representation developed a much broader semantic spectrum. Representation can denote a *mental state,* which includes reproductions of former mental states (*remembrance*) or as imagination (*imaginative function*). Its semiotic function is particularly important for the problem of the use and veneration of images. Here, "representation" may serve as a synonym for "sign" and stands especially for the *signans* in a *signans-signatum* relation. Images are often

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2   As Sonja Luehrmann points out, Orthodox "icons and their use belong to a visual paradigm of 'seeing into being,' where what one puts before one's eyes has profound effects on the kind of person one becomes and the reality one lives in" (Luehrmann 2016, 238).

taken as typical examples of signs. Some of the major topics in the debates on the religious use of images are closely connected to the *semiotic function of representation*. There is also the social implication in representation in the sense that someone (or something) can be represented by someone (or something) else in a specific context. This is the *proxy function of representation* or a representative (*Stellvertretung* in German) (Jurczyk 2018, 126).

Particularly the proxy function of representation seems to play an important role in religion and is therefore of great importance for the field of religious studies in general. An example of the proxy function of religious representation is the pope in his function as *vicarius Christi* (i.e., representative of Christ). Generally speaking, religiously semantized transcendence not only acts through representatives but can also be reached through them. In some cases, the representative might even be the only means to reach transcendence. Whenever one encounters a religious representation, one will likely notice it to display some proxy function. The proxy function of representation particularly suits the demands of religious representations by allowing the transcendent to act towards immanence while also enabling the devotee to reach transcendence through the immanent representative, that is, through images. However, the imaginative function (explicated as the production of images) and the semiotic function of representation must be considered.

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To sum up: In semiotic terms, images as a special kind of media can give the semantic information processed in and transmitted through them a more iconic character (accenting presence), a more indexical character (accenting representation), or a more symbolic character (accenting presentation) (Krech 2021, 65).

[14]

Materiality and Media

Materiality is, first of all, a constitutionally necessary environment of social systems, meaning that social systems (including religion) can only emerge when there are physical structures that provide the possibility of organic and mental systems to emerge. In the broadest sense, everything (including signs) may be understood as material because it cannot exist in the purely mental realm.[3] Materiality can never be addressed per se because the moment it is addressed, it is no longer 'pure' materiality but something addressed or ascribed in a certain and meaningful way.[4] Something that is addressed as a "stone," for instance, is not 'just' a stone but a semiotic configuration of material environment and semantic attribution. In a narrower sense, materiality is something that is explicitly addressed by religious communication when this communication describes built environments, images, statues, nature, etc. There is

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3   Regarding the material nature of signs, see Peirce (1994, 5:287): "Since a sign is not identical with the thing signified, but differs from the latter in some respects, it must plainly have some characters which belong to it in itself, and have nothing to do with its representative function. These I call the *material* qualities of the sign." See Walther (1974, 51): "Every sign which is used is itself a material something. There is no only thought sign which can be a sign independently of a realization" (our translation); see already Augustinus (1997, 14–15): "[…] omne signum etiam res aliqua est; quod enim nulla res est, omnino nihil est. Non autem omnis res etiam signum est ([…] every sign is also a thing, since what is not a thing does not exist. But it is not true that every thing is also a sign.)."

4   The 'thing in itself' is not attainable—neither communicatively nor consciously. It is, as Immanuel Kant points out, a negative concept of reflection and consequently constituted consciously as well as communicatively: "If by a noumenon we understand a thing *insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition*, because we abstract from the manner of our intuition of it, then this is a noumenon in the *negative* sense" (Kant 1781, 360).

no (religious) material without (religious) discourse (see Radermacher's article in this special issue; 2023).

Given the overall aim of religion as communication, that is, to deal with contingency via using the distinction of transcendence and immanence, the integration of the material aspect into religious discourse might be explained by reference to the notion of media. If religious communication is characterized by having to communicate transcendence—which is unknown and thus not observable in principle—with immanent (i.e., known) means, concrete material employed may be defined as an immanent means signifying transcendence, thus mediating between the transcendent and the immanent.   [16]

Within the framework of system theory, a "medium" is everything that allows "forms" to emerge. There are "generalized media of communication" (*generalisierte Kommunikationsmedien*) in every functionally differentiated societal system (with "belief" being a possible medium of religious communication: Luhmann 2000; for a discussion of different media of religious communication, including holiness, see Krech 2021, 71–75).   [17]

In our cooperative publication project, we seek to draw attention to the fact that "media" can be material and that they can become relevant for the study of religion if and when they trigger religious communication ("take-off") (Krech 2021, 103–29).   [18]

For instance, the *Missale Romanum*, one of the central liturgical books of the Roman-Catholic Church, states in § 301:   [19]

> According to traditional ecclesiastical custom and because of its importance, the tabletop of a fixed altar must be made of stone, and of natural stone at that. However, in the judgment of the Bishops' Conference, other dignified, solid, durable and artistically crafted material may be used. The base or pedestal that supports the tabletop can be made of any material, as long as it is dignified, strong and durable. (Deutschen Bischofskonferenz and Hg 2007, 131; our translation)   [20]

This is an empirical indicator that the materiality of an altar is relevant. In other contexts, when there is no explicit or implicit reference to the materiality of the altar, this empirical evidence would be lacking.   [21]

Some phenomena within the religious field are better described as denying the very possibility of mediation rather than being merely the rejection of images (anti-iconism leading to iconoclasm). These phenomena, that we tentatively refer to as "mediaclasm," deal with the paradox of having to denounce the possibility of immanent representation of the transcendent by using immanent means. Although religion, on the meta-language level, might be understood as a practice of mediation to which media are intrinsic (Meyer 2015, 335), there are object-language examples of religious traditions explicitly rejecting such a claim. An example of mediaclasm might be Daoist self-denying explanations of the Dao 'The way is not the way'[5] (this example stems from our colleague Licia Di Giacinto).   [22]

Images

The image one has in mind concerning the relation between religion and images needs to be revised, if not entirely deconstructed. The notion of image is not confined to pictures,   [23]

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5   道不可聞，聞而非也；道不可見，見而非也；道不可言，言而非也。孰知形之不形者乎？

"The Way cannot be heard and what is heard is certainly not the Way. The Way cannot be seen and what is seen is certainly not the Way. The Way cannot be spoken of and what is spoken of is certainly not the

but includes a variety of phenomena of depiction, such as mental images, textual images (see Derhard-Lesieur's article in this issue; 2023), and the reputational image of character or personality of a group or a person.

Virtually all religious traditions take a position towards material and visual means of representation, commonly referred to as images (Krech 2021, 104–5). In most, if not all, cases, however, they do not take a unified position, fixed once and for all, but their attitude towards images and other material media changes depending on the historical situation, the overarching religious worldview, and the concrete image or type of image (see Jurczyk's contribution in this issue; 2023). Therefore, it is inappropriate to state that some religious traditions are generally iconic (i.e., they use and appreciate images), while others are generally aniconic (i.e., they do not have any images or are indifferent towards images), or anti-iconic (i.e., they are against images). Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, in her treatise on *Religion and the Arts*, begins with this rather simplified assumption when writing that

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> [r]eligions can be characterized by their attitude towards acceptance, advocacy, or denial of images which symbolize divinity. For example, the sacred arts are central to the practice and teachings of Buddhism, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and Hinduism; whereas Islam, Judaism, and the majority of the Reformed Protestant traditions deny the arts; and Advaita Vedanta and Lutheran Christianity advocate ambivalence [sic] attitudes towards the arts, let alone sacred arts. The fundamental modes of these religious attitudes toward [art] are iconic (advocacy), aniconic (acceptance), and iconoclastic (denial or rejection).[6] (Apostolos-Cappadona 2017, 27–28)

[25]

She continues to elaborate on these three kinds of religious attitudes towards images (iconic, aniconic, iconoclastic), but then ventures to take a more differentiated perspective, emphasizing that no religious tradition is strictly iconic or anti-iconic, and concludes that the "operative principle is that as each world religion [!] evolves and becomes diversified, its fundamental religious attitude toward art is similarly transformed" (2017, 28).[7]

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The question whether, how, and when religions advocate or reject images (for whatever purpose and reason) is one that can be studied in all epochs of the history of religions. While this historical complexity is impossible to grasp for one scholar, or even a group of scholars, it is possible to discuss the more general and systematic question about the epistemological status of images (including other material media, such as statues, carvings, artifacts, etc.): What and how do they 'mean' something for someone? If religion is generally concerned with making the invisible visible (at least partially and temporarily), then images may be one of several means to do so (e.g., Krech 2021, 109). But they are not always used for this purpose;

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Way. Who is the one who knows that shapeness is shapeless?" (Huainanzi Daoying, trsl. adapted from An et al. 2010, 440).

6   Apostolos-Cappadona uses the terms "image" and "art" relatively synonymously here. However, we suggest that these terms should be conceptually distinguished: "Art" as a social system based on the distinction beautiful/ugly; and "image" as a material carrier or as a medium of communication.

7   This has also been observed by Edmund Hermsen in his 2003 article on religious semiotic systems in relation to aniconic and iconic representation. He states that religious traditions usually have a dialectic attitude towards aniconic and iconic ways of representation (2003, 107). Martin Kraatz has offered a similar framework in his paper "Religionswissenschaftliche Bemerkungen zur Porträtierbarkeit von 'Gott und Göttern'" (1990), outlining how various religious traditions relate to images (specifically images of their gods or supernatural beings).

sometimes, as is well known, religions reject the use of specific images, arguing that what cannot be seen must not be made visible in the form of images.

Most discussions of religions and images at some point arrive at the question of the relation   [28]
between the depiction and that which is depicted, the material substance and the idea being represented, the signifier and the signified. Hermsen points out that religious history provides ample evidence of the full spectrum regarding the relation of the depicted and the depiction (the 'meaning' and the 'medium,' as it were): In some cases, the material depiction is *entirely identified* with the depicted (e.g., in Greek religion the statue is sometimes believed to be identical with the god or goddess, see Klöckner 2012, 32; Jurczyk 2023; the same is true for some Hindu traditions). In some cases, the depiction can be partially or *temporarily identified* with the depicted (e.g., when the god or goddess 'inhabits' a statue from time to time). In yet other cases, the depiction can be viewed as a *mere hint* that the god or goddess is around. At the same time, critiquing images from a religious point of view, i.e. in inner-religious and theological reflection, is as old as venerating images (Hermsen 2003, 108).

Icons

The icon plays a crucial role in the history of religions, since the function of the icon—namely   [29]
bringing something which is not present into appearance—is an essential task of religion. Coping with the distinction between immanence and transcendence, religion has to make the unavailable available, the invisible visible, the untouchable touchable, the unheard hearable, and so on. For instance, Jesus Christ has been called an incarnated icon of the invisible God since early Christianity. However, whether Christians may venerate icons such as the cross and depictions of Jesus Christ or relics of Saints became an object of contestation soon after the concept of the icon was adopted. "By 'icons' is to be understood in this context any form of religious art, whether mosaics, frescos, decoration of sacred vessels, garments and books, even statues, as well as paintings on board" (Louth 2003, 8). We can easily extend the scope of the term icon to further objects such as buildings, places, garments, gestures, words, physical books (Parmenter 2013), and much else.

We do not use the term "icon" in the classical religious/Christian sense as referring to the   [30]
image or figure of a saint (e.g., in Orthodox traditions). Rather, based on Peircian semiotics, the term "icon" refers to a specific aspect that may occur in all kinds of signs, namely the fact that they constitute their meaning by way of (establishing) similarity. The specific signs that we are discussing in this volume (e.g., images, statues, and other kinds of non-textual depictions) are often based on this iconic quality (but they also include indexical and symbolic aspects of a sign). "Iconism," "anti-iconism," and "an-iconism," then, are concepts that describe the attitude of religious traditions towards material iconic signs. These material depictions may stem from all kinds of contexts, including non-religious ones. Often, however, the religious attitude towards icons is focused on specific kinds of depictions, e.g. those of their 'founder' (Islamic traditions), those made by 'the opponent' (Protestantism vs. Roman Catholic traditions), or those depicting specific topics that are deemed unworthy of depiction (e.g., the naked human body in conservative Christian groups). Thus, the attitude of religious traditions towards iconic phenomena is dependent on contexts of religious contact as well as situations of contact between religious and non-religious traditions.

An interesting case are phenomena that signify *themselves as signs*, i.e., which fulfil a dou-   [31]
ble role by indicating the divine and, at the same time, pointing to the fact of indication. An

example might be John the Baptist's pointer finger on the Grünwald altar. Boehm describes another instance of auto-iconic phenomena: "After all: the signified serves here simultaneously as a signifier. This irritates our common expectation, which assumes a difference between the reality of the piece and its subject" (Boehm 2012, 21). It might well be the case that the appearance of auto-iconic structures mark a process of formally transcending iconicity.

Iconism – Aniconism – Anti-Iconism

The first thing concerning the relationship of religion and images that may come into a European reader's mind are instances of iconoclasm in the history of religion, most famously the iconoclast era in the medieval Byzantine Empire or the destructions of images in the course of the Protestant Reformation. The notions "iconoclast" and "iconoclasm" themselves became influential in the early times of the Reformation, when images were foci of intense debate between Catholics and Protestants (Bremmer 2008). However, it is an overly limited approach to seek an understanding of the relationship between religion and images solely through an examination of the diverse phenomena of iconoclasm. Admittedly, iconoclasm in its destructive aspects is more spectacular than simple indifference towards images (i.e., aniconism). Iconoclasm is one important but nevertheless only the most visible expression of anti-iconism, which is, in turn, only one aspect of the relationship between religion and images. What is more, anti-iconism as an element of relational religion cannot be satisfactorily explained without taking the interplay of iconism, aniconism, and anti-iconism into consideration. While in the past it has often been summarized under the overarching concept of aniconism (see Gladigow 1988, 472), it is crucial to differentiate anti-iconism through careful analysis. Ignorance of or indifference towards images as representations of the transcendent (aniconism) has to be distinguished from explicit rejections of images fulfilling representational functions (anti-iconism).

[32]

While we present these three types of the relationship of religion and images here as seemingly homogenous types, it has to be acknowledged that there are various subtypes and intersections between these types in the historical and contemporary material. Still, we consider it helpful to sketch these three ideal types (in the sense of Max Weber) as a heuristic tool to systematize the existing variances. With regard to anti-iconism, we suggest a more nuanced typology below. This type of religion-image-relationship has been much discussed in existing literature and provides a fruitful field of research to this day.

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Iconism

In general, iconism serves as the category to gather phenomena of figurative representations whose veneration produces and processes religious sense in the religious tradition in question. However, in our understanding, this idea seems to go one step too far, as it proceeds too quickly from the phenomenal to the ideological level. It is our conviction that the notion of iconism must be reconsidered with reference to the theoretical level. Thus, iconism is not to be found on the level of phenomena but rather on the level of notions intended to make sense of the diverse phenomena.

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If anything, iconism takes seriously the potential of images for representing or even embodying concepts. Iconism, therefore, does not mark a 'primitive' but rather a sophisticated attitude towards images. In a mild variant, the iconist position claims that an immanent object

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(picture, statue, etc.) *represents* a transcendent entity (a godhead, spiritual powers, etc.). In semiotic terms, this is an indexical relation. In a strong variant, iconism asserts that an object *embodies* a transcendent entity, or, vice versa, that a transcendent entity inhabits an object; i.e., the sign is equated with the object in parts or even completely. In semiotic terms, this is an iconic relation. The religious object, in this way (i.e., as the object providing religious sense), cannot be reduced to its indicational structure, as it tends to be identified outright with the transcendent in the sense of a personified embodiment (Engelbart 1999, 156), often acting as a part of the religious system of communication in its own right (Gladigow 1998, 9; see Rambelli and Reinders 2012, 19–20).

In any case, iconism is not a religious idea solely of its own right. In fact, it does not seem to be an idea in the first place, but only becomes a notion within the context of the conflict triggered by anti-iconist onslaughts. Iconism thus takes place within a situation of contact, and the development of iconic notions is a result of these situations of contact. Burkhard Gladigow even locates the emergence of the general critique of religion in the critique of cult images (Gladigow 1998, 12). To some, this led to the idea of iconism being the natural state of religion's attitude towards images. However, iconism only makes sense as a part of the iconism/anti-iconism distinction. A telling extreme example of iconism—as being closely related to aniconism and anti-iconism—is Frankism's hyper-iconism as a reaction to and provocation of anti-iconist (as well as aniconist) tendencies, above all in rabbinical Judaism, but also in other religious traditions, such as Protestant and Catholic Christianity. As the Frankist example shows, there are traditions that deliberately label themselves as iconic, thus iconizing themselves as iconist traditions (see Stünkel's contribution to this special issue; 2023). [36]

In the religious field, anti-iconist attacks led to the decline of the notion of divine presence, with effects on other parts of the globe (Rambelli and Reinders 2012, 18, 89–90). But the process proved to be reversible. Radicalized iconism, such as later Frankism, shifts the focus of the explication of images from representation to the immediate presence of the transcendent. This claim is often supported by discursive justifications of authenticity and, as a consequence, authority, such as narratives, thus closely connecting the image to a particular divine origin. There is no iconism without religious knowledge, which is manifested religious discourse explaining and commenting the image in question. [37]

In the history of religions, iconist ideas are permanently challenged by a zealous counterpart. An ultimate solution to this process of challenge and response is not to be expected; anti-iconic claims are countered by claims for the visuality of religion. Religious traditions employing a particular kind of iconism are often denounced as being or at least promoting idolatry. As it seems, anti-iconist or even iconoclast positions tend to attract more attention, not least from scholars of religion. [38]

Aniconism

As opposed to merely employing an iconism/anti-iconism dichotomy in the analysis, current scholarly interest into phenomena of aniconism is increasing. This interest is a result of a broader perspective on the question of images which overcomes the fixation on iconoclasm in the examination of European traditions. Buddhist studies deal with aniconism prominently (Seckel 1976; Huntington 1990), and the notion gained broader attention in the scholarly literature on religion in general by the work of Milette Gaifman [(2012); gaifman_aniconism_2017]. Gaifman defines aniconism "as the denotation of divine presence without a figural representation" (2017, 338). This definition resonates with Mettinger's earlier [39]

assertion that cults are called aniconic if "there is no iconic representation of the deity (anthropomorphic or theriomorphic) serving as the dominant or central cultic symbol" (1995, 19). As such, a hostile attitude towards images is not necessarily involved in phenomena of aniconism. In any case, it is important to take the various forms of aniconic attitude into account. In religious traditions, aniconism manifests in manifold ways. It ranges from total waiver of images to non-figurative depictions (often abstract, geometric forms or squiggles). There is also aniconism based on indifference as well as the on conscious decisions to abstain from using images in religious contexts, a decision based on religious reasoning that may ultimately lead to outspoken and religiously meaningful anti-iconism.

There is quite some evidence for the assumption that many religious traditions started with aniconism. Buddhism, for instance: "At the beginning of the artistic creation of the Buddha-image is the non-image—seemingly paradoxical, but quite consistent in the sense of the teaching of the enlightened Buddha, who entered the Perfect Nirvâna at his death" (Seckel 1976, 7; our translation). Regarding Daoism, the "aniconic mode is its most significant contribution to the sphere of Chinese visual culture […]. It […] reflects Daoism's fundamental respect for and obsession with writing, which is often deemed to be a sacred material form connected to the transforming cosmic energy" (Huang 2012, 13). Finally, with respect to Christianity, there was no aniconism in its early state (Finney 1994). However, material objects served non-idolatrous didactic rather than devotional purposes (Jensen 2017). [40]

Anti-iconism

Anti-iconism challenges the notion that an object represents a transcendent entity in a manner where the signifying object and the signified transcendent entity are considered identical. There are many ways of being 'against' images, and these are usually differentiated by scholars writing about the topic. In the following, we briefly summarize a selection of these typologies of anti-iconism (often referred to as "iconoclasm"), considering their analytical value. Based on this very selective review of the literature, we suggest a new typology, which is the result of collaborative work together with colleagues at CERES. [41]

Gottfried Boehm, for instance, talks about "forms of negation" of the image. He states that negation is a constitutive element of images: Forms of negation are similar to a specific kind of anti-iconism that refers only to the pictorial depiction, not to the material substance of the image, because every time an image shows *something*, it covers *another thing*; every decision to *depict* something is a decision *not to depict* something else. Visibility of motifs is based on the invisibility of other motifs. Boehm distinguishes several ways of doing this in the artistic production of images, for example: covering (*Überdeckung*), dissolution (*Entgrenzung*), veiling (*Verschleierung*), bleaching (*Bleichen*), dissolving contrasts (*Kontrastschwund*), erasing (*Ausradieren*), whitewashing (*Weißung*), blackening (*Schwärzen*) (Boehm 2007, 56). These kinds of anti-iconic techniques in the making of art are in themselves productive artistic expressions. Negation cannot 'negate' in the absolute sense because it *produces* meaningful images. It does not reject or destroy the medium of art and images; it negates specific artistic representations by substituting them with other, 'negative' techniques. The *tertium comparationis* of this typology could be called "artistic techniques of negation." Boehm is referring to the production of images by means of negating specific motifs. Regarding the religious history of images, this typology can be helpful in some cases, e.g., when we think of ways in which religious actors use and negate existing images of other or older religious traditions. [42]

Fabio Rambelli and Eric Reinders develop a typology of hurting or damaging the material [43]

substance of images, statues, or other kinds of images in the broader sense. Their typology of forms of iconoclasm is meant to be "rooted empirically in, and organized around, the degree of damage to the material object itself" (2012, 178). On a scale between the poles "more reversible" and "irreversible loss of physical integrity of the object," they distinguish: "negative cultural redefinition," "hiding: burial, disguise, imprisonment," "theft," "humiliation: abuse, insult, demotion," "disfiguring: partial destruction, damage," "destruction with residue," and "obliteration without residue" (2012, 181). These types overlap to some extent and are not meant to be exclusive. However, one should note that not all of these types necessarily involve "damage to the material object." For instance, theft will often include taking precious care of the stolen object, "insulting" an image may not harm its materiality at all but can include verbal insults, etc. While the authors suggest that the *tertium comparationis* of this typology is the "degree of damage to the material object," the types just quoted also refer to the intentions of anti-iconic actions, thus mixing different *tertia comparationis,* which makes this typology less operable.

Bruno Latour, to add another often quoted typology, explicitly takes into account various [44] factors when he suggests "five types of iconoclastic gestures," paying attention to (1) the "inner goals of the icon smashers," (2) the "roles they give to the destroyed images," (3) the "effects this destruction has on those who cherished those images," (4) "how this reaction is interpreted by the iconoclasts," and (5) the "effects of destruction on the destroyer's own feelings" (2002, 26). Thus, his multi-dimensional typology does not focus on the material substance of the images and depictions as much as on the intentions of those rejecting or destroying images as well as the effects this has on the (former) owners and users of these images.

His typology, therefore, is focused on "people": The *A-People* are "against all images": They [45] want to "free the believers […] of their false attachments to idols of all sorts and shapes." They …

> believe it is not only necessary but also possible to entirely dispose of intermedi- [46]
> aries and to access truth, objectivity, and sanctity. […] The world, for A people,
> would be a much better place, much cleaner, much more enlightened, if only one
> could get rid of all mediations and if one could jump directly into contact with the
> original, the ideas, the true God. (Latour 2002, 27)

The *B-People* are "against freeze-frame but not against images *per se*": They … [47]

> do not believe it possible nor necessary to get rid of images. What they fight is [48]
> freeze-framing, that is, extracting an image out of the flow, and becoming fasci-
> nated by it, as if it were sufficient. […] The damage done to icons is, to them,
> always a charitable injunction to redirect their attention towards other, newer,
> fresher, more sacred images: not to do without image. (Latour 2002, 27–28)

The *C-People* are "not against images per se, but against images of their opponents": They [49] "have nothing against images in general: they are only against the image to which their opponents *cling* most forcefully" (2002, 28–29).

The *D-People* are those who "break images unwittingly, not knowingly": They "could be [50] called the 'innocent vandals.'" They "were cherishing images and protecting them from destruction, and yet they are accused later of having profaned and destroyed them" (2002, 29).

Finally, the *E-People* are those who "mock iconoclasts and iconophiles" alike: They "doubt [51]

the idol breakers as much as the icon worshippers" and they "exercise their devastating irony against all mediators; not that they want to get rid of them, but because they are so conscious of their fragility," which includes, e.g., blasphemy and mockery (2002, 30).

This typology employs several kinds of *tertia comparationis*, particularly the intention of anti-iconic actions and the status and kind of image subjected to these actions. Thus, it is well applicable to many religious contexts. Its only 'flaw,' so to speak, is its apparent focus on "people": on the one hand, 'people' are not that easily classifiable; they change their attitudes from time to time. On the other hand, it is questionable if 'people' should indeed be the basic analytical unit of our research design. As Latour himself points out succinctly, "people" are the *product* of social processes, not their starting point (Latour 2005, 75–76).   [52]

Another possible typology of human reactions towards material objects and images has been suggested by Christopher Wingfield in his work on "charismatic objects." Moving between "iconoclasm" (the deliberate destruction of material objects) and "idolatry" (the worshipping of material objects), he speaks of "disinterest," "attempts to obscure or remove objects," and "care and preservation" as leaning more towards idolatry. He adds that while such religious attitudes towards images have been studied at length, "less attention has been drawn to the material qualities of the objects towards which they have been directed" (2010, 54). The *tertium comparationis* of this typology is, once more, the intention of human actors concerned with images and other material representations.   [53]

While these typologies each have their own advantages, they lack a clear focus on the material object itself which should be at the center of the analytic interest, given that we are interested in the materiality of social religious processes, including iconic, aniconic, and anti-iconic processes. Based on these typologies, but shifting the focus to material media as the basis of depictions and images (including statues, carved images, reliefs, and others), we propose a new typology in the following sections, distinguishing four types of anti-iconism, which was developed in the preparation of an exhibition about religion and art by Volkhard Krech, Martin Radermacher, Tim Karis, and Patrick Krüger. These types are not meant as exclusive categories: They are meant as ideal types in the sense of Max Weber.[8] This typology starts with relatively placid criticism of images and ends with complete destruction of the physical matter of an image.   [54]

Don't Show: Concealing, Covering, and Veiling Artifacts

Covering or veiling is a relatively mild form of opposing the material media of iconic representation because in these cases, the images or artifacts are not damaged or destroyed in their materiality, but only withdrawn from view—for a shorter or longer period of time. Oftentimes, this is not even related to a negative attitude towards the image, for example, when they are concealed behind curtains or in shrines; for instance, Torah scrolls in synagogues are kept in shrines and additionally wrapped in so-called "Torah garments." Many practices of relic veneration also work with the principle of partial or complete, temporary or permanent veiling. Only on certain occasions is the veil lifted, the Holy of Holies shown, the statue of the   [55]

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8   Immergut and Kosut aptly explain this concept as follows: "By ideal, Weber did not mean that these [ideal types] were perfect nor did he mean morally right or best. Instead, ideal types were 'mental constructs', created from a variety of observed characteristics and then used as a heuristic tool to make sense of a messy reality, to see patterns and to compare seemingly non-comparable cases in order to elucidate their similarities" (2014, 273).

gods touched, the relic taken out of its shrine, etc. Veiling was already a religious practice in late Antiquity (Barasch 1998).

In the Christian traditions, the Tabernacle (מִשְׁכָּן, *mishkān*) was considered paradigmatic for the practice of veiling: According to Exodus (25–40), which describes how the tent should be built where the chest containing the covenant was kept, there were curtains indicating different zones, accessible to priests in different ways. Only once a year was the high priest allowed to lift the last curtain of the Holy of Holies (Rimmele 2011, 165). The tabernacle, keeping the consecrated host, is often understood to resemble this practice.   [56]

Another example are shrines for relics (chasses) used in some Christian traditions to hold what is believed to be the remains of saints: Joseph Höffner, a German cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church in the second half of the twentieth century, wrote in the preface to a small book about the chasses of Cologne that relics of Christian saints are visible signs of the "promise of resurrection" and that, from the believer's perspective, something of the spiritual powers of the saints "lives" on in their relics, with the relics kept hidden from view most of the time. While they are the "real treasure" deserving veneration, their chasses or shrines point to their importance while hiding them from view (Baumgarten 1985, 7).   [57]

In the examples mentioned, the act of veiling and covering material media is not meant as criticism of these media. Rather, it is an indication of their importance. They are so important that they may not and should not be seen. However, there are also examples in religious history where the hiding and veiling of objects is related to objection. For instance, in the Lutheran tradition, there were so-called "idol chambers" (*Götzenkammern*). The movements of reformation, following Luther's attempt at a general reformation of the Catholic church, often strictly objected images and pictorial depictions of saints, Jesus, or God. Still, where they took over the local church, they did not always destroy and dispose of the old images and liturgical instruments. Many times, these were hidden in specific rooms in or besides the church, the so-called "idol chambers." These may even be considered as an early kind of conservatory or museal practice (to be sure, they were not kept to be looked at) (Dornheim 2019).   [58]

By hiding something from view, the cloth, veil, or other material covering the object becomes the object of direct visual perception. Therefore, Monika Leisch-Kiesl speaks of the "aesthetics of concealment" or "aesthetics of withdrawal." Even more so, hiding something from view can draw more attention to the hidden object than the object in its mere visibility. In a certain sense, veiling is at the same time also unveiling, because the veil hints at a secret that is hidden behind the veil: "Since the veil is both veiling and revelation, it is fair to say that it is an embodiment of ambiguity, of double meaning" (Barasch 1998, 179; our translation). Hiding and veiling produce a new kind of presence (Leisch-Kiesl 2008, 118). While Leisch-Kiesl is referring to the removal of parts of the statue or painting over images (which are permanent forms of concealment), her argument may be extended to temporary forms of concealment that do not interfere with the actual materiality of the image/artifact.   [59]

Intervening with the Material: Deforming and Painting Over Art

Another, somewhat heightened form of anti-iconism occurs when a completed image is subsequently painted over, deformed, or reshaped. This distinction is not a strict categorial one: sometimes, a piece of art may not be deemed 'complete' until it has been painted over it (as happens in contemporary art, e.g., Wijnia 2018, 96; see the technique of "negation" as de-   [60]

scribed by Boehm 2007, 64). In other cases, however, the act of painting over something may express criticism of that which has been painted over. This reshaping or deforming and painting over something often occurs during iconoclastic phases of religious history and religious contact. For example, representations of "foreign gods" are painted over and are thus both 'defeated'—in the eyes of the one initiating deformation—and 'desecrated'—in the eyes of its producers or followers. This applies to many types of religious contact and extends beyond the contact of Christian with non-Christian traditions. Deforming can occur to the material substance of a depiction, when there is actual color applied to the image, or when a statue is bent or partially deformed; or it can occur to the depicted motif, for instance when a specific depiction of a divine figure intentionally does not conform to the traditional canon (e.g., Vlachos 2012), something that is often described as "blasphemy," a theological term used to identify speech or actions that are deemed as insulting a deity, a religious belief, or the practices and objects related to it. Its etymology (βλασ = injure, harm; φήμη = talk, speech) indicates that this term refers to speech that is unacceptable from the religious perspective. Just like "iconoclasm," the term blasphemy has been used in scholarly literature on the relationship between religion and the image (Cancik 1993, 219), but it seems that it carries too much theological weight, hence the use of the more general and abstract term "anti-iconism" in our collaborative project.

Violence against Objects: Damaging and Disintegrating

Anti-iconism is present in an even more heightened form when the material substance of an image or plastic depiction is mutilated or damaged, for example, when the surface is peeled off or when parts are removed. The transition to the next stage of anti-iconic practices (iconoclasm) is fluid. In religious history, this happens, for example, in violent religious contact: Images of gods and deities of the other religion are mutilated and sometimes left standing in their mutilated form as if to mark their inferiority. At times, even a preservationist motive can be held responsible for the "mutilation" of objects, such as the collecting of Buddha heads, for instance. Latour refers to this as the "D-people" who "break images unwittingly, not knowingly" (2002, 29).   [61]

    Still, this kind of hurting the material substance is not always a negative act of (partial) destruction; it can also be part of the production of *iconic* objects: For instance, in 1486, a thin cloth was brought to Nuremberg on behalf of the regents of Spain, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabelle of Castile. In Nuremberg, a monk pierced it six times with what was believed to be the "Holy Lance" (kept in Nuremberg from 1424 to 1800 in the *Heilig-Geist-Spitalkirche*). Having produced a powerful relic, the regents' agent returned to Spain with the pierced cloth. This turned into a fashion of mutilating things with the lance: People drew pictures on paper or parchment and had them pierced with the lance. These objects were considered to be "tertiary relics" (the body of Christ being the primary relic and the lance the secondary one) (Schlie 2015, 59–60).   [62]

Iconoclasm: The Destruction of Images and Statues

With total destruction, the maximum form of anti-iconic practices is reached. Anti-iconic attitudes and practices culminate in the complete destruction of the material substance of depictions. This, too, is often the case in hostile confrontations, but not exclusively so, for   [63]

example when destruction is a consciously chosen, appreciative use of media: some ritual objects in religious contexts are deliberately destroyed after the ritual has been performed (for example, the Malanggan carvings in Papua New Guinea, e.g. Barroso 2016; Poser 2018, 166). Some Buddhist mandalas are also destroyed after the ritual is completed because they are no longer needed. When the physical substance of objects is burned, they are usually no longer useful, though at times even the ashes, the remains of complete destruction, are kept and venerated (as is the case in Buddhist relic veneration).

The term "iconoclasm" is derived from Greek εἰκών and κλάω, which means "to break an image."[9] Even more than "anti-iconism", it is a much-discussed concept in the history of religions. Still, we assume that it carries a more normative (and theological) connotation than "anti-iconism," which is why we prefer the latter as the analytically productive, comparative term. Iconoclasm, then, is only one of many forms of anti-iconism, probably the strongest way of interfering with the material substance of icons. The term has its historical roots in the image controversy of Eastern (predominantly Greek-speaking) Christendom (eighth to ninth century AD). In a narrow sense, it refers to the prohibition of the production and veneration of religious images or of certain images and motifs within a particular religion as well as the destruction of such images (Cancik 1993, 217; see also Apostolos-Cappadona 2017, 28):   [64]

> When King Josiah (621 BCE) ordered the cleansing of the Jerusalem temple in ancient Judea and the eradication of idolatry, he deposed idolatrous priests; burned and defiled all other cult sites; and destroyed altars, pillars, and statuary (2 Kings 23:4–20), initiating the first major iconoclastic movement. Similar destruction occurred again during the Byzantine iconoclastic crisis. Witnesses during the first Byzantine episode watched icons burned, pillaged, and destroyed in city and countryside alike. Punishments for those who resisted included mutilated bodies, cut off noses, eyes poked out, hands and ears cut off, and flagellations. Soldiers destroyed icons and burned monasteries. (Schildgen 2008, 21)   [65]

Even these kinds of brutal, anti-iconic actions may still be ambivalent because they do not entirely remove what they destroy: throwing a statue off its pedestal and smashing it to pieces leaves an empty space, ready to be filled with new icons. What is more, even the moment of iconoclastic destruction may itself become a new icon (such as, in contemporary times, the burning twin towers of the World Trade Center in 2001). This is why, in art theory, Boehm considers iconoclasm as an "element of creation" (*Moment der Gestaltung*) (2007, 62).   [66]

Against *Which* Images?

Anti-iconism is usually directed against specific images, depictions, media, and motifs. We do not know of any anti-iconic attitude that opposes *all* images and *all* material media of depiction. Indeed, this presents a significant challenge since every form of communication, including those that oppose images, inherently relies on some form of material sign. Moreover, beyond their specific focus on topics such as the portrayal of deities, most iconoclasts do not extensively concern themselves with images. The discussion of anti-iconism in academic discourse often lacks a more thorough investigation into the question of against *exactly which images* some actors argue and *exactly* which ones they seek to hide, damage, or destroy.   [67]

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9   Instead of "iconoclasm," the Byzantines usually referred to this debate as "iconomachy," the "image struggle" (Brubaker 2012, 4).

For instance, the Byzantine iconomachy was not about images in general, but about "religious images"—and not even about any kind of "religious images" in the broadest sense, but only about "sacred portraits—of Christ, of his mother the Virgin Mary, and saints—in Christian worship" (Brubaker 2012, 4). From this perspective, it was a very limited discussion, though with far-reaching consequences. [68]

Therefore, it seems important to specify against *which images* or *which kinds of depictions* anti-iconic arguments were and are directed. This varies over time and from one case to another. The rejection of images and subsequent action against them is not an overall, encompassing rejection of all kinds of images (Boehm 2007, 54), but directed specifically against some images because they depict (or seek to depict) a specific motif. In other cases, it is not even the type of motif which is depicted, but it is the specific way in which it is depicted, or the material media which are used to depict it (a circumstance that is often referred to as "blasphemy" in theological discourse; see above). And this, in turn, is not even generally agreed upon within a religious tradition. What constitutes a 'right' or a 'forbidden' image is an issue of religious and theological debates. For instance, Islamic traditions may generally reject the visual depiction of Muhammad, but there are images, produced in orthodox Muslim contexts, representing him, e.g., his face hidden behind flames. Other depictions of Muhammad, depicting him in a way that is perceived as blasphemy, are rejected and destroyed, and their makers attacked. [69]

A first, and incomplete, list of the characteristics of images that may become objects of anti-iconic attitudes and actions in religious contexts comprises the following cases: [70]

- *The motif must not be visualized at all* (e.g., God in many Jewish traditions and in most of the Muslim traditions, the Prophet Muhammad as well), and therefore believers do not make any such image and oppose (and sometimes destroy) images or other material media that show this kind of motif. This may be the case when one fears the identification of the image with the depicted figure, which is often associated with "idolatry" (Leisch-Kiesl 2008, 116). [71]

- *The motif must not be visualized in specific ways* (but may be depicted in other ways). In some Christian traditions, there are images of God, of Jesus, of Mary, and many other "holy figures," but there is a conscious awareness that they may not be depicted them in an offensive way (often referred to as "blasphemy"). It is not so easy, however, to clearly define the borders of offensiveness, and this may vary from one period in time to the next and from situation to situation. [72]

- *The material media used for the depiction must not be used* (e.g., a crucifix made from 'unworthy' material such as fat or raw flesh; or a Muslim prayer written on pig skin). Again, it is not fixed once and for all which material media are allowed and which are not. [73]

- *The motifs must not be shown because they are 'illusions' or the opponents of one's own gods* (e.g., the depiction of 'pagan gods' from the perspective of Christian missionaries). This is why Christian missionaries were often aggressive towards what they perceived as images of 'Pagan' gods. On the other hand, they often collected, and thus preserved, the images they were rejecting. [74]

- *Specific motifs which are not religious in a narrow sense but still must not be shown or used* because they run counter to the moral values of a specific religious tradition. Human [75]

nudity, for instance, is often subject to criticism by religious actors or specific things and beings considered to be impure.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of images still requires careful scrutiny and a differentiating approach in [76] a study of religion centering on contact situations and their importance for the emergence and development of religiously meaningful concepts. The following articles intend to utilize the research findings at CERES and the Käte Hamburger Kolleg "Dynamics of the History of Religions between Asia and Europe" in order to analyze the processes inaugurated by the distinction between presentation, representation, and presence of the non-displayable transcendent within the visible immanent.

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