

Godmakers
The First Idols

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Godmakers: The First Idols

‘On either cheek he had four moles, a yellow, a green, a blue and a red. In either eye he had seven pupils, sparkling like seven gems. Each of his feet had seven toes, each of his hands had seven fingers...in one of his hands he carried nine severed heads, and in the other hand nine more. He held these heads as emblems of his valour and skill in arms, and at the very sight of him the opposing army shook with terror.’ (The Cuchulainn Saga, edited by Eleanor Hull. Quoted in: Celtic Gods, Celtic Goddesses. Stewart, R.J., Blandford, 1990)

‘An idol worshipper sees god in a stone, and, therefore, takes the help of an idol to establish his union with god.’ (Mahatma Gandhi)

Introduction

A preacher went into an Indian village, saying: ‘God is everywhere’. He accused the people of idolatry, insisting there was no God in their cult image. An illiterate villager retorted: ‘You just said God was everywhere – surely he must be in our idol as well?’

It is not possible to pinpoint the time when people first began to impose form onto the unseen. It is unlikely to have been very long after they came to believe in a spirit or spirits beyond their ordinary perceptions. To try to make an image out of an idea is particularly human.

Adherents of polytheistic religions point out that even the devotees of a ‘formless god’ find it difficult to avoid mental pictures. They ask what is the difference between an image created in the mind, and one on canvas or stone.

‘Images are felt to be necessary because man needs some mediating channel through which to receive the sacred power: God is too great for man to meet directly, and he cannot be totally revealed.’¹

Countless millions of peoples for tens of thousands of years have found both mental and physical images of use in their attempts to connect with a divine force. Among every community that has worshipped idols, the more thoughtful members have maintained

that their clay gods are simply a bridge to the real. A few have gone so far as to believe that, somewhere in the journey towards the real, the bridge must be crossed and left behind.

Indeed, those who can do without images have always managed to get beyond them, even when they live in an image-based culture. But, as we shall see, the popular mass craves, creates and constantly renews the symbol. So, while one ancient Egyptian could transcend his cult object and feel himself in the presence of the divine spirit, hordes of the ordinary folk held out for miracles, excitement, sensation. Time and again those sorts of people have found their way to the image, even if they live in a culture which overtly prohibits religious form.

This paper will look at the ways people have used images to embody gods and spirits, and what they have derived from this process.

The first idols

The first idols are almost certainly as old as art itself. Female figurines were introduced into Europe as long ago as 30,000 BC, from central Russia and Siberia, where they probably originated. They are believed to have been a sort of fertility idol, a prototype mother goddess.

‘These little statues are carved in stone, bone or ivory, and vary in height from two to ten inches. As a rule they depict the nude female form...almost without exception, they portray the fully mature woman...the sexual characters of the female body are strongly emphasized, if not exaggerated.’²

These mother goddesses held sway for an extraordinary period of time. Over twenty thousand years later, through the Neolithic and Chalcolithic eras, they were still going strong. In south Eastern Europe alone, around 30,000 miniature sculptures of clay, marble, bone, copper or gold have been retrieved from 3000 archaeological sites. Palaeolithic figurines always have been found in occupation layers, implying they belonged to people who lived some kind of settled life.

‘They must have been part of a domestic fertility cult responding to the power of the life-force...a form of imitative magic practised in parallel with the hunters and their hunting magic in the cave paintings.’³

Hunting tribes of Northern Asia still make little female statues, which they call *Dzuli*. The idols represent the tribes' ancestral origins.

'The men confide their homes to the *Dzuli*'s safekeeping when they go hunting and offer them groats and fat upon their return. In much the same way, Palaeolithic figures appear to have served both as tutelary spirits and as symbols of the origin of family and tribe. In short, they were the 'great mothers'.⁴

The passing of the last ice age presented hunters of Mesolithic times – about 10,000 BC – with new challenges. Older breeds of animals, such as the mammoth, upon which they had depended for food, died out. It seems that new beliefs helped them to cope with the new pressures. A crudely carved willow trunk, over eleven feet long, is believed to have been the idol of reindeer hunters. The top end is rounded, suggesting a head, and a long 'neck' separates it from the 'shoulders' below.

'There seems little doubt that this figure represented the spirit or divinity venerated by the reindeer hunters who had camped on this site...they did apparently make offerings to their god, attaching these to the poles that surrounded their idol.'⁵

A discovery in the cave of Montespan in France suggests that even earlier men may have fashioned idols of animal spirits. A clay figure of a headless bear was found pierced with holes made by arrows. Between its forepaws was the fossilized skull of a young bear; apparently the bleeding head of a real bear was placed upon the statue. The whole is very reminiscent of beliefs held until recent times by the Ainu of Japan and the Gilyaks of Sakhalin. They believed that each year the spirit of a ceremonially killed bear became their protector, and could ask the powerful spirit of the mountain for a good year's hunting.

The prehistoric reverence for the animal is believed to have developed into the animal cults of the ancient Egyptians. Entire cemeteries of mummified cats, dogs and other animals have been found. In a religious tradition that lasted for well over three thousand years, the Egyptians believed certain animals were divine incarnations of gods. In keeping with their supernatural nature, the gods could be incarnated in more than one animal, or the same animal could be linked with several gods.

The very early Egyptians worshipped fetishes derived from nature. Plutarch describes one such object, which was worshipped at Busiris and Mendes in the Delta at a very early period, and which later became associated with the cult of Osiris.

‘According to Plutarch the fetish was a hollow tree trunk, which restored to life the dead who were placed in it...The fetish object became very popular as an amulet throughout the dynastic period and models of it...were laid on and inside the body, and worn by the living as ornaments.’⁶

Later, both animals and fetishes developed into anthropomorphic idols. These had human bodies, with the original fetish object often recognisable upon their heads. It was as though the human imagination of the ‘other’ refused to be confined to natural forms.

Spirit into form

For those who believe in them, there may be many images of a single god, many sacred places dedicated to his worship. The god is believed to be present in them all, somehow mysteriously transcending them, as well as residing within them.

For the first humans, the land itself became the physical repository of their spirits. The Aboriginal Australians probably structured their polytheism along very similar lines to their prehistoric ancestors. They believed that during the supernatural period known as the Dreaming, mythic beings travelled across the physical world, shaping it during their adventures.

‘Wherever they went...they left part of their own spiritual essence. This spiritual essence remains at specified places today, and is accessible to Aborigines if the circumstances are congenial and if the occasion so demands.’⁷

Some of these beings physically changed shape at the end of their travels. A being might become a tree, a cave or a rock, and this object would contain his spirit.

Others still manifest themselves occasionally – for example every rainbow which appears in the sky in north-eastern Arnhem Land is the being Banaidja. The beings’ adventures have left scars upon the land: in one place is a red ochre deposit that was formed from the blood of their arm veins, in another place is the impression in a rock where they sat down.

‘Traditionally Aboriginal people went about their ordinary lives surrounded by images...that can be read by Aborigines as physical evidence of those beings’ continuing and indestructible spiritual presence in the land.’⁸

The widespread nature of these beliefs suggests that they are very ancient indeed. In Vietnam, for instance, Tho-than, the earth spirit, reveals himself for those who know how to look, by letting a single tree grow in the open countryside. No farmer would cut down the tree: he sees it as a sign that the spirit wants offerings to be made upon this spot. Twice a month the people place a dish of rice, a cup of tea or rice wine there. Before the field can be safely ploughed, and before the harvest can be carried in, more elaborate ceremonies must be held.⁹

The ancient Japanese religion of Shinto also uses natural objects to call down the force of the *kami*, the invisible spirits that surround us. Priests may place a rope made of rice straw around a boulder or tree to evoke the power of the spirit. They are careful to send them off at the end.¹⁰

Early Greek religion was probably very similar: the Greeks too perceived the gods as everywhere, and their early altars were in groves containing emblems of the god’s presence, such as a tree trunk or a holy pillar.

‘It was only as images of the gods became more important that an impressive temple was thought necessary as a house for the god.’¹¹

The older form of worship survives to this day in Greece, in the shape of wayside shrines – although the ‘offering’ (usually a bottle of wine) is nowadays made in the name of Mary or Jesus.

However, a land of spirits which are either invisible, or else disguised as natural features, is a stressful place. The Vietnamese, for example, have to contend with a complicated hierarchy of spirits, from local deities which rule a single tree or stone, to the dangerous gods of weather, droughts, mountains and so on. Because evil spirits, although of low rank, exist in enormous numbers, they cause problems almost daily. Often people cannot see which spirit they have offended. However honest or hardworking a person may be, he can never escape from nagging worry.

‘He is always at risk of crossing an evil spirit. Often he does not realize it until too late. When the axe goes into the woodcutter’s leg, has he taken away a wood spirit’s resting place?’¹²

The hapless Dunang islanders, on Japan’s Ryukyu archipelago, fare no better. The Dunang have not developed any iconic religious forms to represent the spirits whose divine paths invisibly crisscross the island. The locals have a healthy respect for the power of image: one informant quickly rubbed out a map he had been persuaded to sketch showing the paths of the spirits. But to live among spirits without form is to live in the shadow of perpetual fear.

‘People can never be quite sure about the precise whereabouts of the spirits and tend to keep away from desolate places along mountain ridges and the coastline.’¹³

No wonder that most human societies have at a certain point in their development attempted to find a way of luring down the unseen spirits and containing them in a more manageable form.

Calling down the gods

It may have started with the necessity of quietening the spirits of the dead. There is evidence that ritual burial stretched back forty thousand years. Bodies at the Celtic site of Danebury were weighted down and their skeletons dismembered, presumably to prevent their spirits from rising to molest the living. The Celts were themselves enthusiastic head-hunters. The spirits of their enemies trapped in the severed heads became powerful talismanic slaves, in the thrall of their new owners.

Once you have form, you have control. In Southern Spain, painted pebbles – with stylised human forms or patterns on them – have been found dating back to prehistoric times. They are remarkably similar to painted stones possessed by Australian aborigines, known as *churingas*, which are believed to contain the souls of the dead.

‘Each tribe has its *churinga* storehouse – a cave where the *churingas* of all its male and female members are preserved. The *churinga*, then, is regarded as the embodiment of the dead person whose spirit and qualities *are transferred to the present possessor*.’¹⁴

In some regions of West Africa today, men carry around stools in which part of their spirit is said to reside. A man must guard his stool – and hence his spirit – carefully from thieves, and nobody may sit on it except his oldest son after his death.

In Vietnam, a dying person's family will cluster around him, to preserve his soul in a piece of white silk, known as the *hon bach*, the cloth of the white soul.

'It is laid on a dying person's chest and immediately he breathes his last is tied around the soul to capture it, in a shape resembling a human figure with head and limbs.'¹⁵

As has been pointed out in another paper, the spiritual essences of people, spirits and animals are often considered to be interchangeable. So it is unsurprising that many peoples have used very similar techniques to capture the spirits of nature. In Africa, a sorcerer may be able to force a spirit to take up its abode in a fetish of wood. These objects are widely feared to this day.

India's original tribal population of Orissa – whose hunter-gatherer and shifting cultivation culture has remained essentially unchanged for five thousand years – have their own version of this process. If a spirit should trouble them or their families, they draw an enticing image of an attractive house on the wall of their dwelling.

'Through invocations and chants the family invites and induces the deity whose wrath it has...incurred to come and reside in the home. The moment it takes up residence in the painted structure it is trapped there and constrained from causing further havoc.'¹⁶

This process is reminiscent of the kind of therapeutic approach of the father whose son was suffering nightmares, and who gave the lad the picture of a gun, so that he could shoot the monsters in his sleep. In other words, things that are problematical in the world of imagination may be far better dealt with upon their own plane.

Other rituals, however, serve more ambitious ends. They aim at bringing the world of the spirits closer, rather than merely containing them. Australian aborigines held performances re-enacting events of the Dreaming. They believed that this periodic re-creation of the same mythic conditions of the Dreaming renewed the earth and was vital for its continuance. Their ritual was not

complete without the presence and active involvement of the mythic being in question. Carved images were used as a way of focussing the required presence. They were intended as vehicles.

‘The image is made ‘alive’ by the spirit which enters it, at least temporarily, in order to preside over his or her own rituals.’¹⁷

The Maori, who had few representations of their gods, used god sticks in a similar way. The stick was portable, and about a foot long, with a sharpened end which could be thrust into the ground. They prepared it for the temporary presence of the god by painting it with ochre, binding it with flax cord and dressing it with feathers. It was then pulled with the string to attract the attention of the god, who could then be solicited. The stick itself was not worshipped.

What idols mean to their followers

Images of the gods are never considered by their adherents as simple blocks of stone; they are always imbued with some spiritual presence. Before an image is installed, it may be spiritually ‘charged’ in a ceremony during which the priest prays to God (or to a god) to make the image His abode, either permanently, or for a specific period of time. Some religions go to great lengths to disclaim charges of idolatry.

‘The Hindu carvings symbolise the various attributes of God. These images are not worshipped for their own sake. The prayer is offered not to the idol, but to the Divine Spirit, of which the image is but a mere symbol.’¹⁸

Form, however, is a very double-edged tool. It is a fine line between an image as a mediator of the holy, and an object that has become intrinsically holy itself. The symbol is both powerful and enduring. Thus, for instance, the carved form of the Australian aborigine may represent a mere vehicle, which the spirit of the deity may enter, but:

‘...aborigines usually go further than this: they state that it is the real body of a living thing.’¹⁹

Indian tribal people of South Gujarat go a step further still in their worship of carved wooden crocodiles.

‘The wooden representations of the crocodile are considered to be not just a wooden image, but a live being. It can see with its eyes and it needs a shelter to keep cool. It can bite as well and turn around on its post. A story about how an unbeliever, who put his arm in the mouth of a crocodile to prove it was only wood and not alive, was suddenly caught by the crocodile, is often narrated.’²⁰

When ethnographers commissioned the carving of a crocodile god, the carpenter at first refused, until the fieldworkers promised to install it with due ceremony. The ritual was carried out in the evening. The newly carved crocodile was splashed with water and received offerings, all to the accompaniment of songs in its honour. All that remained was for the carpenter to imbue it with a spiritual ‘charge’ that would render it of use to its owners. He did so with a recitation:

‘If children are asked, give children; if money is asked, give money; if grain is asked, give grain; if service is asked, give service; give everything asked for...

‘We offer you worship, gift of chicken, gift of coconut, gift of rice, offering of wine is given.’²¹

Thus was a brand new god created. This was no unusual event; across the world new deities are continually making their debut on this plane of existence. In Vietnam, ambitious villagers who improve the lot of their fellows may live in hope of one day becoming a deity. In each village are shrines dedicated to minor local heroes: perhaps the man who introduced the potter’s wheel to his particular village, or a son of the community who became a scholar.²²

Chinese popular deities include men and women of consequence who are believed to have the power to protect from demonic forces, to grant cures and blessings.

‘To a great extent, many Chinese deities can be regarded in the same light as early Christian saints, the spirits of deceased humans who can intercede in Heaven on behalf of the living.’²³

In the sixteenth century, as China underwent a period of instability, people flocked to this type of deity. There were so many gods of different forms and origins that people needed a practical way to distinguish between them. The solution the ever-practical Chinese people came up with was a series of low-cost images, often

paintings or block prints. Worshippers could collect individual prints and store the collection in an envelope, as their own personal pantheon. In exchange for their devotion, people expected the gods to work hard on their behalf: to drive out insects from the crops, to expel bandits, to cure illnesses and to exorcise devils. If a particular deity lapsed in this duty, its image was easily removed from the envelope and replaced with another.

‘Belief in certain gods and spirits was only secure as long as the deities were able to give the necessary assistance. If a god proved to be ineffective, he was rejected and another, more vigorous god, was chosen instead.’²⁴

To this day, Chinese deities are seen from a very pragmatic point of view. Their adherents are looking for tangible results, as in this recent encounter in Kowloon:

‘A thin, elderly god-carver in the back streets explained that, as a Roman Catholic, he viewed the images with great disdain but...people needed the comfort and assurance of a power beyond humanity, and he, as a Catholic, sympathized with that view, although his parish priest had remonstrated with him for encouraging the reverence of idols.’²⁵

Compare this approach with a no-nonsense explanation from a contemporary New Age believer about how the multiplicity of divine images can be practically used to tap into a formless spiritual force:

‘When we are making use of a power such as electricity, the satisfactory result will depend on the type of form we present to the source. Therefore if we wish the benefit of sonic entertainment we do not present the material image of a lamp to the power supply, we connect a tape deck.’²⁶

This way of conceiving the divine certainly has the merit of problem-solving practicality. No bones are made about the fact that the worshipper is after a result in the shape of a tangible benefit. Perhaps if we do picture a spiritual force in electrical terms, we will not be surprised that images themselves have a tendency to become holy when ‘charged’ with ritual. So too, in a fairly mechanical way, may anything which has been associated with them. In the

nineteenth century Benin kingdom (now part of Nigeria), not only were the idols made by the court carvers holy, the guild of craftsmen themselves, known as the *igbesanmwan*, partook of this spiritual quality.

‘The *igbesanmwan* were formerly in the spirit world and were considered very intelligent. They were the only people working with Osanobua (the creator god). As soon as they carved a figure it was so beautiful that Osanobua would give it life and send it to earth. When the first Oba (ruler) came from the spirit world, an *igbesanmwan* was sent with him.’²⁷

It seemed that virtually anything that came in contact with their dangerous power could catch it, unless safety precautions were observed.

‘The goods given to the *igbesanmwan* in return for their labour were not seen by them simply as payment but also as ritual offerings to the power inherent in their tools. Without such offerings the tools, through constant use, would become hot and injure the carver.’²⁸

In some parts of the world, like Vietnam, worshippers may partake of the impalpable essence possessed by their idols.

‘The devout stroke their statues while praying, then stroke themselves and their children on the head and body to transfer the blessing of the guardian spirit.’²⁹

The attraction of image worship has proved extraordinarily durable. In ancient Egypt, the same form of Osiris was worshipped continuously for three thousand years. His potency was undoubtedly increased in the public mind by his air of mystery. Secrecy was a key ingredient in Egyptian religion. The early house of the god was the temple where the cultic image of the god was kept hidden behind locked doors. These images were of wood with inlaid eyes and they were small enough to be carried around in processions. No examples have survived to the present day. It was the duty of the ruler to tend the image as one would a living creature.

‘He sprinkled water on the image twice from four jugs, clothed it with green and black paint. Finally he fed the image, by laying before it bread, beef, geese, wine and water.’³⁰

Probably the more thoughtful Egyptians progressed to the idea of the image as the temporary habitation of the god. However, the common people were eager for miracles and wonders. From time to time the cult image would be carried out of the shrine to be worshipped by the multitude. They were held by the public to be oracles, which possessed magical powers of healing.

The ancient Greeks took the opposite course to the Egyptians, whose gods were as supernatural as possible, and made them like men in nature. While this may have taken away some of their mystery, it increased the sense of identity between gods and men.

‘This transformation of the gods into the likeness of men was a prodigious stroke of emancipating thought. It meant that the Greeks were so impressed by the range and possibility of human gifts that they could not conceive of the gods in any other shape.’³¹

By the very character of their gods, the ancient Greeks could be assured that the forces of nature were being governed by creatures who thought and acted in a very human way. Their idols reflected their mental images, rather than being intended as gods themselves.

‘The Greeks were never idolaters in the sense of worshipping actual images which they had made. Rather was the ancient statue a statement of praise about a god...’³²

The general population, however, probably held a more literal than symbolic reverence for its marble gods. There are accounts, for instance, of statues that were chained up, for fear that they would simply walk away from their devotees. This, however, did not stop the Greeks maintaining a rather scornful attitude towards the ancient Egyptians, and their divine animals, as in this third century BC fragment:

‘I could not be your ally, for our ways and laws do not agree at all, but differ far from one another. You adore the ox, but I sacrifice it to the gods...’³³

The abstract and the literal

Just as there is confusion about whether a deity is or is not identical to its cult image, there is also divergence upon whether representation should be literal or figurative. Over the course of history, the pendulum has swung both ways. Yet the two sides of the

argument are based upon a common assumption: that a thing maintains a close identity with its image.

There was a widespread ancient belief that an image or word was identical with what it represented and that, being alive, it was vulnerable to the operation of magic. From the earliest days, the need for encoding was already appreciated. For example, while cave artists drew impeccable drawings of the animals they wished to magically attract, they were careful to depict the human beings as matchstick men – probably to spare them from coming under the same magical influence. Similarly, the upper Palaeolithic artists appear to have been conscious of the potential power of the image when they drew what is believed to be their ‘bear spirit.’ They were careful never to draw an entire bear; instead they grafted a wolf’s head or a bison’s tail upon the image, as though they feared to portray it as it really was.

‘The ice-age hunter artists would have avoided any naturalistic portrayal of the bear because, like the bear hunting peoples of our own day, they feared to call it by its own name.’³⁴

In the Australian Aboriginal tradition, the decorations upon idols do not represent the deity – instead they symbolise topographical features of the land with which he is associated. The whole is a kind of code, which leaves the door open to the suggestion that the image is only one facet of a wider ‘reality’.

‘There are layers of images: an image or series of images, behind an image. Some images are open to all...(but) the ‘secret image’ or ‘hidden image’ may be regarded as the most sacred of all.’³⁵

The Ibo people of Africa use the basic premise of a spiritual identity between image and reality to build their devotional houses. They fill them with models depicting their community as exactly as possible the way they would like it to be. Known as Mbari houses, these structures take years of dedicated, ritualised effort to build. When they are done, they are simply allowed to crumble, as the sacrifice (of work) has already been made. The Ibo are sure to include not just the items that actually exist in their village, but all the things they wish for as well. In the thirties, for instance, they added models of automobiles. By the seventies, they had progressed to electrical fittings and even aeroplanes.

‘Like the finished house, this ritual of construction is a ceremonial renewal of the Owerri Ibo world, and like the Mbari it contains numerous symbolic references to crucial activities, concepts, and beings: marriage and procreation, the farming cycle, sacrifice, important foods, man and god in reciprocal relationship.’³⁶

The Ibo hope that a close representation of the world they would like to live in will make that world appear. Elsewhere, devotional artists felt that they needed to transform the merely natural – to make it less like nature – in order to enter the realm of the supernatural. The Celts used a type of representational ‘shorthand’ in their sculptures that aimed at encapsulating the divine. They were certainly capable of a high level of natural depiction, but in their religious tradition they used symbolism as a deliberate tool, to show that the reality they were aiming for was not a physical one. They believed that by isolating the characteristic they wanted, they could concentrate it for ritual benefit.

‘The Celtic artist...was able to reduce the essentials for representation to the absolute minimum, enough for recognition but no more. Economy of detail captured the “numen” of the essence of an image and what it symbolised.’³⁷

The Celtic artists raised their depiction of the gods almost to the level of a secret language. They used a wide range of conventionalised graphic designs to symbolise abstract ideas. So, for instance, the cross and its variations became symbols of the cycle of life, which had to be ensured through agriculture. The symbols of ‘becoming’ – crescents, caterpillars and horns – had their own significance.

‘They do not depict the end result of wholeness, but rather the continuous striving towards it, the active process of creation.’³⁸

These designs are still found in the folk art of today, although nowadays their original import has been lost and they retain only a vague association of being ‘lucky’ in European peasant culture.

In other places, the Celtic craftsmen made deliberate use of exaggeration to increase the power of the image. They accentuated the result or attribute which they wished the idol to produce. So, for example, a figure of a god intended to heal eye diseases at the Celtic spring sanctuary of Magny-sur-Tille in Burgundy has enormous eyes. Stone votives of pilgrims were given multiple

heads or limbs, suggesting they hoped that the intensification of the image would similarly intensify the power of their plea.

In other cases, figures intended to represent pilgrims at healing shrines were left with deliberately vague features, presumably so that pilgrims could stamp their own spiritual identity upon the blank canvas.

‘The idea may have been that a schematic, understated image could be interpreted flexibly by different people, a kind of choice of perception.’³⁹

The main function of ancient Greek artists was to impress man and the gods by portraying them as true to life as possible. Their beautiful images were intended to make one aware of the holy presence of the god who had come to make his temporary abode with men, to create art works so divine in nature that they would break through the world of the senses.

‘The Greeks delighted in works of art, but saw in them not so much an extension of the living scene for its own sake as a connexion between it and something else.’⁴⁰

Finally, there is evidence to suggest that in the midst of some of the most ornate imagery of any culture – the Hindu tradition – at least one artist may have come full circle from ornamentation to simplicity. The temple of Jagannath at Puri is one of India’s architectural wonders. The image of the god Jagannath himself is kept in an innermost sanctuary of the splendid building. Yet that image itself is bizarre: it has a peculiar smile and is without hands or legs. One Hindu author believes the artist wilfully left it unfinished, finally unable to bear reducing the divine to a mere image.

‘We can see in our mind’s eye the picture of the artist trying to come in conscious contact with the divine and to transform spiritualistic ideal into a realistic matter...the mind of the artist revolted against the idea of the almighty god being a mere replica of man.’⁴¹

The power of the form

The kind of images discussed in this paper are both attractive and durable. The Pharaoh Akhenaten (1364-47 BC) discovered this when he tried to eliminate the gods in favour of worship of Aten,

the supreme universal creator, represented by the solar disc and its rays, installing himself as its mediator.

‘It is sufficient to say that this ‘solar monotheism’ proved to be ephemeral and on the death of its propagator Egypt and her pharaohs reverted to her manifold gods and long-hallowed iconographic forms.’⁴²

Idols may be suppressed, but they refuse to disappear entirely because they fulfil a function in the popular mind. They thrive on times of adversity, when people crave a tangible amulet that might provide them with the immediate satisfaction and reassurance they crave. During the fourteenth century Black Death, for example, villagers deserted the church and flocked to the pagan goddess Hretha, who was a type of earth mother, associated with Diana and venerated as a grain deity. She was worshipped at the new moon in woodland groves. In 1351 the Bishop of Exeter was forced to denounce her as an ‘unchaste Diana’:

‘... after a stone and timber temple, complete with altar, candles and cult statue, had been erected on a wooden hill above the river Torridge.’⁴³

Residents of the Italian city of Siena had a bruising experience with a rediscovered cult idol. Around 1300 AD they were delighted to unearth a nude Venus sculpted by Lysippus. They immediately installed it in a place of honour in front of the city hall as a protective deity. When plague broke out in 1348, they turned against the image as violently as they had first embraced it. The good people of Siena, however, had not lost their belief in the potency of the image. One account says it was broken into pieces and buried in Florentine soil so that its evil qualities might be transferred to the enemy.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The multiplicity of images varies widely. However, the nature of human beings does not. Nor do the things they yearn for: certainty in the midst of doubt, form in the face of the intangible, an end to fear. Across geographical and historical distance, idols and images have adhered to certain very specific rules. Those rules are governed by the desires of human beings to impose form and order out of what they do not know. And in a few cases, to use form to break through to the invisible truth they feel lies beyond.

Notes

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