



Ikon and Logos Communicating the Living Word in a Visual Culture

Proposed area of study as part of the DThM Course at Durham University The Revd Jon Marlow

For the research component of my study on the Doctor of Theology and Ministry programme I would like to explore how Church of England theological education institutions (TEIs) are preparing Ordinands to minister in a visual culture.

Background and Definitions

In the Church of England, whenever deacons, priests and bishops are ordained, when lay-readers are admitted and at the outset of each new post, the Preface to the Declaration of Assent is read. In it, every licensed minister is reminded that the task of the whole church is to profess the faith that has been handed down to them and to proclaim it afresh 'in each generation.'¹

Ordinands need to be educated and formed to lead this mission of proclaiming the faith afresh in each generation. For this to happen, Ordinands should be students, not only of theology, but also of culture.

Common Awards is the framework provided by the University of Durham for the accreditation of Church of England ministerial education in TEIs. This training, given to Ordinands before their ordination, is known as Initial Ministerial Education (IME) Phase 1.

Several modules within Common Awards make provision for the detailed study of culture. In the description of one such module, the aim is that students are able to 'read, analyse and critically evaluate contemporary culture and theological material in a sophisticated and rigorous way'².

This is no easy task as culture is constantly and rapidly evolving, the pace of change being driven by new technologies which allow instant and visual interaction and communication across a global networked society.

¹ Preface to the Declaration of Assent, Canon C 15 of the *Canons of the Church of England*, 7th Edition (London: Church House Publishing, 2015).

² Module Description of Christian Doctrine and Contemporary Culture (Durham: *Common Awards Framework*), p1.

I define a Visual Culture as a society where images are used as a primary means of communication; where verbal and written communication play a secondary or supplementary role. Social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and Vine typify this trend with the visual and transient 'snap', the digitally filtered 'post' and the six second video 'vine'. These new technologies exist alongside traditional TV and film, which themselves have evolved their mode of delivery to 'on-demand' services via the internet, especially on smartphones and tablets.

This is not just about entertainment, however. Advertisers are becoming increasingly sophisticated in the way they promote products to consumers and even terrorist groups use targeted visual imagery as a tool for radicalisation and recruitment. The government's 'prevent' strategy to combat extremism and the radicalisation of young people recognises the power of images and video to promote extreme views, change beliefs and actions.³

Visual material, especially when distributed across social media platforms, is a powerful tool for communication. Its use conditions not just how we see the world but also how we see ourselves. Any Common Awards module which requires critical dialogue with culture must understand and engage with visual communication.

Logos and Ikon

The study of the theology of mission in a visual culture will lead to a discussion about whether Christians should communicate primarily through words rather than images. In such a debate we might anticipate the objection that Christianity is a religion of the book and therefore proclamation is a matter of words. Indeed the Declaration of Ascent quoted earlier reminds ministers that the Christian faith is 'uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds'⁴.

In the New Testament, however, Jesus is described as both *logos* and *ikon*, word and image. (λόγος in John 1:1 and εἰκὼν in Colossians 1:15.) At the moment, much of our communication in churches is verbal, but could images be permitted to play the primary role in proclaiming the faith afresh in this generation? Might images even replace the written and spoken word?

Stages of Research

- My initial aim would be to obtain a general picture of the training in visual culture that is currently being offered in IME Phase I. This would include looking at what is mandated through the Common Awards framework and also what is being done by individual TEs. It would be achieved by undertaking:
 - An analysis of the aims and learning outcomes of modules in the Common Awards framework.
 - An online survey of Ordinands about their current perceptions of the training that is offered.

³ Prevent Strategy (London: HM Government, 2011), p47.

⁴ Canon C 15.

- An online survey of TEI tutors (mainly in missiology) to gauge their perceptions of what is offered.
- Follow-up interviews with groups and individual survey participants. These would be grouped at TEIs which have been selected to give a range of traditions and modes of study.
- Identify and analyse exemplars of good practice in the Church of England and other English denominations, both in training (in TEIs) and in ministry (in individual parishes and dioceses).
- Reflect theologically on the extent to which the visual arts can convey the faith 'uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures'.
- Reflect on how the visual arts have been used to communicate the Christian faith in selected pre-modern cultures and the Renaissance period.
- Work with the skilled practitioners identified above to develop resources which could be used by TEIs and Dioceses in the training of Ordinands.

Supervision and Conclusion

The research described in this paper covers a number of disciplines offered within the University of Durham and within the scope of the DThM course. These include: theological pedagogy, biblical theology, visual culture, sociology of religion and church history.

In preparation for my application to join the DThM, I have discussed these proposals in outline with David Wilkinson, Mike Higton and Pete Ward.

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