In a modern guidebook on living and dying, the Tibetan Buddhist master Sogyal Rinpoche identifies three methods of meditation that he has combined into a single practice for bringing body, speech, and mind into alignment in meditation—the use of an object such as an image, reciting a mantra, and concentration on breathing, called “watching the breath.” Learning to meditate is essential, “for it is only through meditation that you can undertake the journey to discover your true nature, and so find the stability and confidence you will need to live, and die, well.”¹ Each of these methods withdraws the practitioner from attachment to fear, envy, and desire by focusing consciousness on itself, the very act of breathing, speaking, thinking. I am reminded of the instruction pregnant women and their birth partners receive in preparation for delivery: selecting a focal object assists women in the struggle of labor by helping them to maintain regular breathing and to resist panic. Having forgotten her focal object at home, my wife chose to squeeze my hand—with a frenzied grip that I’ve not forgotten. Whatever works—“skillful means,” as Buddhists say.² Sogyal Rinpoche also teaches that a shrine with pictures can greatly assist the dying person.³

Why is it that the contemplation of images exerts the power to arrest the mind and deliver it from the anxieties that fragment consciousness and bind it to such invented torments as frustration, rage, jealousy, or obsession? Before answering that question, we must note that this benevolent effect is not confined to images. Music does this for many people. As do running, gardening, reading, chanting, chopping wood,
or slow walks in the woods. The things we do with our bodies have direct impact on the state of our consciousness. Body and mind are not separate entities, but enmeshed in one another. Touch one and you touch the other; calm one and you calm the other.

Images do this in a powerful way for many people. They seem to fill up consciousness with the presence of the pictured place or person. Buddhism teaches that the undisciplined mind is a hectic rush of thoughts that mirrors the restless turmoil of events that constitute the body and the world around us. Sogyal Rinpoche puts it this way: “Just look at your mind for a few minutes. You will see that it is like a flea, constantly hopping to and fro. You will see that thoughts arise without any reason, without any connection. Swept along by the chaos of every moment, we are the victims of the fickleness of our mind.” It is not necessary to be a Buddhist to see the truth in this observation. If consciousness is a shifting fabric of representations, an image used in meditation may serve to stabilize it at least momentarily—calming the eddies that disturb the surface of the mind, displacing the distractions with a single object of attention. If the mind takes the shape that occupies its elastic space, an image of someone whom we respect or cherish will exert a salutary effect—on the mind and the body. This is the regenerative benefit of relaxation.

Perhaps this helps explain why people cherish photographs of loved ones and friends and devote themselves to amassing and organizing photo albums or domestic displays of their pictures. It may also help us understand the allure of art and history museums and the use of icons and statuary in churches and temples. And it may provide a clue to the comfort of television, that glowing electronic hearth whose sounds and flashing images readily become a soothing presence in the home. In every case, viewers experience an absorption in an image. They cultivate a variety of visual practices that engage them in this absorption. Whether the absorption is contemplative, bringing the mind into a deeper experience of itself, or is a mind-numbing distraction that passes time (which can have its own regenerative effect), seeing is the medium that occupies the viewer in some manner of attention. Even if it’s the hypnotic trance of channel surfing, the flea-hopping subsides and a certain form of rest ensues.

The Sacred Gaze

Seeing is helpfully understood as a great variety of visual practices, forms of engagement with oneself, with others, with the past, with the
worlds engaging viewers as viewers look at them in one manner or another. My aim in this book is to examine seeing and images in just this way. In recent years scholars of “visual culture” have variously suggested that the study of images should take a broader look at how images are actually part of ways of seeing. Vision happens in and as culture, as the tools, artifacts, assumptions, learned behaviors, and unconscious promptings that are exerted in images. But seeing is about more than its product. The argument of this book is that seeing is an operation that relies on an apparatus of assumptions and inclinations, habits and routines, historical associations and cultural practices. *Sacred gaze* is a term that designates the particular configuration of ideas, attitudes, and customs that informs a religious act of seeing as it occurs within a given cultural and historical setting. A sacred gaze is the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance. The study of religious visual culture is therefore the study of images, but also the practices and habits that rely on images as well as the attitudes and preconceptions that inform vision as a cultural act. I use the term *gaze* with a certain caution. Like many scholars of visual culture today, I am drawn to the concept of the gaze because the term signals that the entire visual field that constitutes seeing is the framework of analysis, not just the image itself. Yet with this advantage comes the challenge of a passel of meanings and conceptual entanglements associated with the term. The word has been broadly used in the last three decades and often within a thicket of theoretical interpretations that make one wary of the usefulness of the word. Some of these interpretations reduce the gaze to a narrow meaning. For instance, for many writers the gaze has meant something almost singularly negative—the power of the voyeur, the coercive power of the privileged classes, or the totalitarian authority of surveillance. While these kinds of meaning certainly pertain to the controlling use of visual fields, the idea of the gaze should not limited to these ocular forms of manipulation.

I understand the concept of gaze to mean the visual network that constitutes a social act of looking. A gaze consists of several parts: a viewer, fellow viewers, the subject of their viewing, the context or setting of the subject, and the rules that govern the particular relationship between viewers and subject. These rules, implicit in a given genre of imagery and the occasion on which an image is viewed, stipulate conditions such as the subject’s knowledge of being seen, what the viewer can expect from the act of seeing, whether the viewer can be seen...
looking at the subject, and whether other viewers can see the subject
with themselves. Protocols also urge appropriate demeanor, gesture,
and response among viewers. For instance, on certain occasions one
should yell or sigh or cry or keep silent. The rules outlining suitable
behavior are learned and therefore they change over time along with
the style, prestige, appeal, and authority of images.

A gaze is a projection of conventions that enables certain possibilities
of meaning, certain forms of experience, and certain relations among
participants. Although in standard English the word *gaze* means a par-
ticular kind of looking—a steady, intense or absorbed form of vision—
the term is used here in a technical sense. Gaze designates the visual
field that relates seer, seen, the conventions of seeing, and the physical,
ritual, and historical contexts of seeing. The central structure of the
gaze as it is most frequently constructed in visual experience is the rela-
tion between subject and viewer. These two exist in a rough symmetry:
subject and setting correspond to viewer and audience. A gaze can run
in either direction, depending on the rules in force. Examination of
images demonstrates that they tend to fall into two broad categories.
Some images portray a gaze as parallel to the viewer’s world; others
engage viewers in gazing or being the subject of gazing, that is, in
being seen while they see. Consider the intent look of the mother pic-
tured with her child in figure 57 (p. 202). This illustration of a Christian
tract that seeks to instruct mothers in the proper spiritual formation of
their children presents its gaze as exemplary. The mother’s act of look-
ing seeks to will the child’s hand toward the Bible in front of them
rather than toward the transient, earthly pleasure of flowers. Her gaze
is so intense that her face seems to dissolve into the child’s head, as if by
infusion she would transform the child’s being into the steadiness of
her gaze upon the sacred book. Another instance of the gaze mapped
out within an image occurs in Harry Anderson’s painting called *God’s
Two Books* (fig. 24, p. 91). The gaze of the woman who has been study-
ing the Bible in her backyard is met by the looming gaze of Jesus, who
appears in a wall of foliage. The glory of nature that she sees takes the
form of the deity who is revealed to her in the Bible and looks back at
her as an incarnation in nature. If the image is simply meant to corrob-
orate nature and holy writ, the face seems to mean more, intensifying
her act of reading and destabilizing any merely instrumental regard for
the physical world.

While these two images show in some way how vision happens,
other images absorb viewers in the act of looking. Warner Sallman’s
popular image of Jesus (fig. 39, p. 156), for example, invites viewers to behold the subject steadfastly, to enjoy Jesus’s passive submission to his father’s will. This picture presents Jesus in a way that many viewers have celebrated (or derided) for his feminine gentleness. Admirers of the image praise the accessibility and meek humanity of its Jesus. They refer to him as their “best friend.” Their absorption in the image is facilitated by the fact that Jesus does not return their gaze, but looks humbly upward, toward his father. Mel Gibson’s widely viewed film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) uses a rather similar likeness of Jesus but subverts his prettiness with outlandish violence and the graphic portrayal of suffering. The film seems to thrive on displaying the bloody abuse of the attractive Jesus, thereby subordinating devout viewers to a merciless demolition of the gaze they bring to the film. This violation is quite intentional. In an interview Gibson stated that he “didn’t want to see Jesus looking really pretty. I wanted to mess up one of his eyes, destroy it.” His determination to destroy Jesus’s eye seems emblematic, as if he intended to assault the very means of vision. By violating the eye, Gibson eradicates the view of Jesus as pretty and effeminate, as well as the theology, piety, politics, and lifestyle that he may believe correspond to that prettiness and effeminacy. Gibson wants to destroy an entire way of seeing and install in its place a manly Jesus who is his father’s son, one who by virtue of extreme iconoclasm has been purged of rival ways of seeing. The film plunges viewers into a protracted agony in order to wrench from them the devotional gaze that is fixed on such imagery as Warner Sallman’s portrait of Jesus.7

I hope this brief discussion signals why I find the word *gaze* useful: it encompasses the image, the viewer, and the act of viewing, establishing a broader framework for the understanding of how images operate. A gaze is a practice, something that people do, conscious or not, and a way of seeing that viewers share. By *gaze* I mean not just one domain of vision, such as “the male gaze,” but rather an entire range of ways of seeing. In order to signal the manifold yet related genres of gaze, one may enumerate several acts of vision such as gape, glimpse, and glance, and even such extended ocular performances as glom and glean. As different species of gaze, each configures a discrete relation among viewer, image, and what the image represents. And even more: each configuration carries particular assumptions about what is visible, the conditions under which the visible is visible, the rules governing visibility and the credibility of images, and what power an image may assert over those who see it. There are many more forms of the gaze to be
defined historically and culturally. This stream of alliterations may help readers bear in mind the range of visual operations designated by this book’s use of the term *gaze*.

To understand the structure and operation of vision as a religious act, to *see* seeing, as it were, we must look for its visibility in a number of places. Each of the chapters in this book sets out to discern this visibility: in the use of images as visual evidence in historical interpretation (chapter 1); in what people do with images in their rituals of adoration, destruction, devotion, teaching, or commemoration (chapter 2); in the epistemological covenants that viewers enter into with images and how these shape the experience and meaning of what people see (chapter 3); in how the violent removal from sight shifts vision to other objects and relies on the notion of idolatry to do so (chapter 4); in the way that images mediate the visual encounter of two cultures (chapter 5); in the manner that visualizing gender organizes social life (chapter 6); and in how gazing at the flag has come to imagine national identity as powerfully as it has (chapter 7). In short, showing vision as socially and historically constructed religious practices is the task of this study.

My overarching argument is that the study of religious images is best undertaken as the study of ways of seeing. This means that visual practice is the primary datum alongside images themselves and that the two, together, insofar as religion happens visually, constitute the visual medium of belief. Belief is not a proposition or a claim or an act of will prior to what people see or do as believers. Or, if that is all that belief is, it has little to tell us about visual piety, which is the constructive operation of seeing that looks for, makes room for, the transcendent in daily life.

The Medium of Belief

For any approach to the study of religion that regards it as a set of practices more than a set of teachings, the English word *belief* is problematic. A belief or the act of believing understood as assent to a proposition is unequal to conveying the complexity and lived experience of religion. Belief is also a *Christian* way of thinking about religion. Because of the duty that Christianity has required of it, the word *belief* tends by long history to mean “tenet” (from *tenere*, to hold), that creedal (from the Latin *credo*, “I believe”) utterance to which one must *hold* in order to belong to the community of the church. Christianity—
Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox—is deeply structured by the idea of right teaching (orthodoxy). One must affirm certain beliefs and deny others. The history of Christian doctrine is a history of vehement disagreement and struggle to legitimate one belief and deny the legitimacy of another. The anthropologist Malcolm Ruel has prudently argued that one must beware of this semantic legacy of belief. But English speakers are limited by the tools the history of their language has bequeathed them. Faith, conviction, assent, doctrine, and dogma are no better, and generally worse.

And belief has the advantage of behaving as an active noun, only a step away from its verb form, to believe. Belief is something one does, which suits my focus on practice. Moreover, both noun and verb boast the distinct advantage of doing important duty in religious and nonreligious contexts. “I believe this is the correct address” and “It’s our belief that the future of the economy is bright.” Both utterances may express acts of entirely nonreligious faith and imagination. In addition to a religious conviction, belief may be an opinion, a fantasy, a groundless delusion, a conjecture, or an inference.

Yet, inasmuch as belief is understood principally in terms of assent to a proposition, opinion, or impression, it is an inadequate representation of what constitutes religion, however much that view of belief may accord with important aspects of Christianity’s creedalist definition of belief. As one Christian hymn beseeches: “Make us eternal truths receive/and practice all that we believe.” According to this piety, God delivers the truth to a passive humanity, which seeks divine help in putting such truth into practice. Belief is the affirmation of divine truth and therefore precedes action or practice. In fact, this is not what belief actually looks like or how it operates in religious life among most Christians. And it certainly does not represent other religious traditions. Practice is far more constitutive of belief than creedal affirmation is.

Ask most Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or Sikhs about their religion, and it is quite likely that you will receive a combination of the following in reply: an account of certain essential teachings; particular stories of the believer’s life or sacred narratives; or descriptions of what are held to be definitive practices, such as prayer, diet, dress, and worship. Religion, in other words, will probably be defined by an interweaving of creedal statement, personal testament or a narrative of its founder, and particular practices and behavior. Although doctrinaire Protestants will rely heavily on verbal formulations, even they, in the end, will need to avail themselves of the practical
difference it makes to believe what they do. For it is almost certainly true that most people spend far more time each day being religious than they do merely reciting creedal propositions. Belief happens in what people say, but also in what they do. It is embodied in various practices and actions, in the stories and testaments people tell, in their uses of buildings, pictures, in the taste of food and the smell of fragrances, in the way people treat children, one another, and strangers. Belief, in other words, does not exist in an abstract, discursive space, in an empyrean realm of pure proclamation, “I Believe.” Belief happens in and through things and what people do with them. Theistic belief is grounded in the assumption that what one says or does in the manner of prayer, worship, or moral effort penetrates to the heart and mind of the deity. The deity sees what the believer does, gazes into the believer’s very heart. While many Christian theologians are predisposed to stress the preeminence of words and concepts in delineating belief, this book argues that one gets much further in understanding religion by examining how people combine what they say with what they do and see.

Another way of putting this is that belief is mediated, which brings us to another key term to consider—medium. I wish to know how religious belief takes shape in the history of visual media. How is visual piety, visual belief, a function of its mediation? How does belief happen visually? How is belief a visual practice? I do not intend by the mediation of belief simply the expression of an antecedent tenet or teaching, though that is certainly a topic that belongs to the study of religious visual culture. The mediation of belief that I have in mind goes to the heart of belief as a historical phenomenon. The history of religion is not the same as the history of theology, that is, the history of what an intellectual elite has said about sacred matters—however relevant that history may be to the larger history of a religion. The history of religion is much closer to the unity that Sogyal Rinpoche discerned between thinking and doing in the practice of meditation. A medium—whether it is words, food, or looking at pictures—is where belief happens.

Accordingly, the study of belief proceeds here with two presuppositions in place, assumptions that, although they may sound simple, are consequential for the study of religion as lived practice. First, that belief does not happen without a body. Even when it happens in the discursive form of a proposition, it must be uttered by one person to another, by someone in the presence of a company of people, or argued, circulated, collected, studied, and taught in print. The material culture of religion is the physical domain of belief, the lived practices that constitute so
much of the ritual, ceremonial, and daily behavior of belief. Ignoring this wealth of evidence means ignoring most of what people do and how what they do shapes what religion does and means for them.

Second, it follows that, rather than being a private or purely subjective matter, belief happens between and among people. Belief is shared in imagery and visual practice, which commonly act as a fulcrum for such rudimentary forms of association and social organization as family, clan, ethnic and racial affiliations, and the elective associations of religious belief in modern societies. Visual culture can be a powerful part of the shared apparatus of memory, national citizenship, and the socialization of the young and of converts. Religions and their visual cultures configure social relations, over time and space and between one life-world and another.

The media scholar James Carey once suggested that communication consists of two rudimentary aspects that remain in tension with one another: the transmission of information and the ritualistic joining of communion. Both draw, he noted, from religious contexts. Certain versions of Protestant Christianity stress the role of conveying information, construing “belief” as assent to doctrines or official teachings, and therefore lay greater emphasis on creed or content as definitive of belief. By contrast, other religious traditions lean more heavily on rituals of communion as definitive of religious identity and as the authoritative source for teaching, socialization, and moral conduct. Of course, orthodoxy (creedalism) and orthopraxy (ritualism) should not be strictly polarized, because belief always engages both sensibilities, though in different preponderances. Moreover, not only do these categories fail to apply helpfully to many religions, they don’t always perform well even among those traditions of belief from which they draw their formulation—Christianity and Judaism. But we may wish to complicate creedalism rather than simply dismiss it. Doing so will allow a recentering of its function and will suggest a deeper purpose among practitioners, one that turns out to have a good deal to do with images and the hostility toward them.

The creedalist notion of belief argues that speaking is more powerful as an expression of faith than seeing. Creedalists of one sort or another insist that speech is the medium of the divine creation of the universe and the revelation of holy writ. Divinity reveals itself in what is heard (the spoken word, speech), according to Paul (Romans 10:17). Believers living in modern, literate societies quickly assume that speech also, or even primarily, means what is written. I do not propose a stark pitting
of hearing against seeing, word against image. To do so merely plays into the hands of religious apologists for the word. More interesting, it seems to me, is to recognize the slippage from spoken to written word and to scrutinize what it means for the experience of visual as well as print media in religious belief. But it is not so simple as regarding the Protestant Reformation as a decisive turn from orality to print culture. Speech and imagery both persist. Charisma and aura find new ways to infuse themselves into mass-culture artifacts. The iconicity of printed texts is a category of experience that Protestants relish.13

Regarded in this manner, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims rely, in my hunch, on a number of devices to experience the iconicity of their holy texts, which they all consider to have been inspired by God as his definitive self-revelation. Sortilege, the practice of randomly selecting a passage from the sacred text (Torah, Qur’an, or Bible) as a special message to the seeker, is one such practice. Creating amulets with scripture inscriptions, such as the hamsa, used by both Jews and Muslims (see fig. 15 on p. 66), or similar devices, such as the mezuzah on the doorposts of Jewish homes, is another. English-speaking Protestants are often deeply attached to the King James Version of the Bible and have long displayed their Bibles in ornate bindings, enthroned in parlors.14 And the use of the red-letter, or rubricated, Christian Bible, which marks the spoken words of Jesus in red type, is a noteworthy instance of the way some modern Protestants experience the iconicity of the biblical text. They read the red portions of the Gospels with a special sense of being close to Jesus, reinfusing the written word with the status of utterance, the phonic presence of the speaker. Signaled visually, the red-letter text urges devout readers to hear the sound of their voice reading Christ’s words as the sound of his voice. In this cooperation of several media, the graphic signifier promotes the iconicity of the written word qua spoken word. Rubricated text is text made especially transparent or iconic to the divine reality expressed by the words. The public recitation of scriptures in churches, mosques, and synagogues likewise resonates with the sound of the divine, animating the letter with vocal presence. Sikhs sing their scriptures in worship, Buddhists chant sutras, Hindus chant the Vedas.15 Sound is a powerful “icon” when it turns into the very thing it represents: the voice of the divine. Whether spoken, sung, heard, or seen, sacred forms of representation are performances that transform sounds and images into the things they signify.

This metamorphosis is why the search for the “true image” prevails in many religious traditions. And it is one reason why debates over the
canon or the “authentic” texts of scripture are so important. The conflict between word and image is waged in many religious histories because the two are seen as mutually exclusive competitors for the status of revelation. When late-seventh-century Armenian icon painters insisted, “Our art is light itself, for young and old each understand it, while only few can read the Holy Scriptures,” an ecclesiastical council was convened to reprimand the artists and subordinate them to the representatives of the word: “the scribes, the readers, the exegetes.” The Iconoclastic Controversy seethed in Byzantium for over a century as successive emperors opposed and vindicated the place of icons in worship. And the Protestant Reformation and its legacy both castigated and rescripted the role of images in Christian life.

One historically significant aspect of the rise of print culture in the West was the tendency to define belief as assent to theological propositions. Since the early centuries of the church, Christian orthodoxy had defined itself in terms of creeds but had resisted allowing verbal utterance to eliminate visual piety. Images belonged to the profession of faith. Seeing, no less than saying, was a fundamental, even liturgical, aspect of believing. This is evident in Eastern Orthodoxy’s victory in the Iconoclastic Controversy. It is evident in popular and monastic practice in the West before the Reformation and in official church ritual after. And, as will be clear in chapter 3, it pervades popular Protestantism from Luther’s day to the present in spite of vigorous Protestant polemic. The history of Christian visual piety is a history of varied practices and attitudes regarding the configuration of verbal, print, and visual media. Although priority is often assigned to speech, the claim is never without contradiction or qualification. And the claim is pilloried by Surrealist artist René Magritte, as we shall see in chapter 3.

In what follows, I offer a sketch of the sort of analysis that the history of visual media invites if these media are to become primary evidence in the study of religion. I focus on Christian material, in part because the problem that I have articulated is prompted by the history of Christianity and in part because Christian art is my area of expertise. It is also urgent to realize, however, as Malcolm Ruel has argued of the concept of belief, that Christian dogmatics has driven the discussion of word and image in the history of the study of religion in Europe and America. I hope the following consideration will confirm the relevance of Ruel’s caution.

No theologian inveighed against images as adamantly as the Protestant John Calvin, who declared that images can teach nothing about Christian truth, since they are the product of the human imagination.
and therefore inherently inaccurate on matters of divinity. The human mind, he claimed, is a factory of idols: it knocks out images or portrayals of the divine that are manufactured for the singular purpose of serving human needs. Calvin was right, inasmuch as images take the place of previous referents. The Armenian and the Byzantine iconophiles proved that, as did the ancient Israelites who filled Moses’s absence with the creation and worship of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32). Images engage in rivalry with one another, seeking to supplant or replace their competitors. But if this conflict, or *iconomacy* (struggle of images), happens among images, it also takes place in acts of iconoclasm, as I will explore in chapter 4: the destruction of images by those who regard them as an affront to the logocentric understanding of sacred text is, in fact, another form of iconomacy. Consider Calvin’s claim that the biblical word is the only proper image of the Holy Spirit.

Arguing against those who subordinated scripture to the effervescent and antinomian dictates of the Holy Spirit, Calvin insisted on the complete and binding agreement of spirit and scripture. The spirit, he contended, “would have us recognize him in his own image, which he has stamped upon the Scriptures. He is the Author of the Scriptures: he cannot vary and differ from himself.” Calvin urged his readers to reject an unfettered pneumatology of revelation, which pits living breath against dead letter. He favored a concept of the sacred text in which spirit and word are bound to one another in a cooperative way. The idea of writing that he endorsed understands the Holy Spirit to have imprinted (“stamped”) itself in the words of scripture, committed itself to them in a unique, authoritative, and self-confirming unity. Readers, therefore, are not free to sever the spirit from the biblical text, but can only find the two corroborating one another. This cooperation is revelation for faith. Calvin’s hermeneutic conflates the Holy Spirit with the spirit or gist or divine intention of the biblical text. In this shift from speech to writing as the medium of revelation, breath becomes essence or meaning. Charisma is constrained by textuality, and text is animated by deeper meaning as discerned by the eyes of faith.

For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God’s face, shines; and that we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the Word.

Understood in the context of Reformed Protestantism’s desire to avoid the excess of ritualism and sacerdotalism, on the one hand, and the
libertine extremes of charisma and spiritual antinomianism, on the other, Calvin’s hermeneutic marked a substantive direction for the future. In order to make the move from orality to textuality, Calvin advanced a notion of text that sublimated the performative aspect of spirit-as-breath and rejected image as dissimulation.

His position is, of course, quite tendentious. Is holy writ really free of the cultural interests of its plethora of individual authors and redactors? How can the “spirit of the text” be distinguished from “Spirit stamped in the text” without the use of history and tradition? Calvin’s assumption that the biblical text enjoys a direct relation to its divine referent is not only critically dubious but also ideologically charged with an important task. By insisting on the dissimulation of images, he created a media hierarchy in which the falseness of images underscored the truth of words and the iconicity of scripture. Calvin needed to vilify images in order to secure the transparency and autonomy of the biblical text.21

Among the advocates of images, acheiropoesis is the powerful device for legitimating the authority of images. Images not made by human hands are the visual equivalent of texts dictated by angels or otherwise revealed to a mortal amanuensis. The history of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, indeed, virtually any religion, includes accounts of images fallen from heaven or miraculously furnished.22 One Hadith of Muhammad states that the Black Stone set within the stone cube, or Ka’bah, in Mecca came down from heaven and now occupies the central place of prayer, where the Stone had been originally placed by Adam himself and subsequently reestablished by Abraham. Tradition states that the Prophet kissed the Stone. The practice is imitated to this day by Muslim pilgrims, who circle the Ka’bah and kiss the Stone, rub it, or gesture ritually toward it in order to receive its blessing, or barakah (fig. 1).23 Apparently the Black Stone (al-hajar al-aswad) was literally not made by human hands, having fallen from the sky as a meteor.24 Originally white, according to Muhammad, it turned black upon absorbing the sins of Adam’s offspring. The drama of seeing the Black Stone and other venerable stones set into the cube is enhanced when the black cloth (kiswa) that covers the cube is raised to expose the bottom rows of stone in the midst of the pilgrims. The sacred quality of the Stone extends to the cloth, which includes Qur’anic calligraphy and the name of Allah embroidered in gold. The cloth’s black color signifies to some the unrepresentable, absolute nature of the divine. Each year the cloth is replaced with a new one, and the old is cut up and
distributed among pilgrims and selected individuals and organizations, disseminating the *barakah* of Islam’s holiest site.²⁵

A Buddhist narrative describes a dragon that changed itself into the appearance of Buddha in order to reveal the authentic likeness of the Blessed One. After the dragon reverted to its original form, the holy men who had witnessed the apparition described it to artists, who created a wax form that was invested in metal. Several sculptures located in Thailand today are thought by local adherents to be the statue.²⁶ Other stories tell of images that perform miracles, such as transporting themselves across the sea or appearing in trees, where they are found and then worshipped. In Byzantium and early medieval Rome, icons of Christ and of the Madonna and Child,
believed to have been miraculously wrought or produced by humans with divine help, were displayed on city walls and in processions to protect Constantinople and Rome against invading armies and pestilence. Images that display such origins and power are naturally authorized as special forms of revelation and enjoy unique and enduring claims to credibility.

Seeing Vision

Seeing images like these is the believer’s way of learning how to see revelation happen. By carefully scrutinizing such images and the history of their use, scholars of religious visual culture can show how vision takes place; they can study vision as a historical and cultural formation. An example from the history of Christian art will help explain what I mean, especially since it inverts Calvin’s hierarchy by making a biblical author also a painter.

Since the seventh and eighth centuries, Orthodox Christians have told the story that St. Luke painted the Madonna and Christ Child as well as wrote the New Testament Gospel that carries his name. The pose of Mother and Child that was thought by early medieval Christians to be the one that Luke portrayed first appears in the seventh century, and images of Luke himself painting Mother and Child appear somewhat later. It has been suggested that the legend of Luke the painter was invented by iconophiles, the defenders of images against those in Eastern Christendom who maintained that icons were nothing more than idols and therefore unsuitable in Christian worship. But if icons shared the historical origin and authorship of the Gospels, who could deny their authority and central place in liturgy and devotion? St. Luke offered the most detailed account of the birth narrative and early childhood of Jesus. If anyone was to know the savior’s appearance, it was this ancient authority, whose primary informant had been the apostle Paul. Surviving Byzantine portrayals of St. Luke painting the Virgin and Child often show Luke seated before an easel, painting his subject as a portrait icon—an unmistakable attempt to endorse icons and their veneration. In the later Middle Ages, depictions of St. Luke drawing the portrait appeared in stained glass, manuscript illuminations, and altar paintings with increasing frequency, in step with the rapidly growing cult of the Madonna. Not only seeing Mary herself but also seeing her seen, as the subject of a devoted gaze, became important to medieval