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“*Can anyone make an artistic representation of a divine being without falling into idolatry?”*

As an incomprehensible and Divine Being, encapsulation of God into a single representation is impossible. But this does not mean, of course, that various aspects or attributes of God may not be stressed in some artistic form or fashion. Whether one can capture God or another divine being in an artistic representation without falling into idolatry remains to be seen. When one speaks of a ‘*divine being’* he immediately thinks of God, but other celestial beings such as angels are spoken of as “divine” as they proceed from him. Additionally, there are many art forms, several of which are endorsed by the bible even in their representation of the divine. For these reasons it will be shown that while God should not be represented in many forms, there are some forms which are acceptable.

Historically, theologians have looked upon the second commandment as forbidding the creation of an image of God. Some, like Francis Schaeffer, present an alternative – that the commandment only forbids the creation of an image for worship. Calvin counters that God has already forbidden worship of another in the first commandment, that God adds the second “to show what kind of worship he approves or rejects.”[[1]](#footnote-1) “By these words [God] curbs any licentious attempt we might make to represent him by a visible shape, and briefly enumerates all the forms by which superstition had begun, even long before, to turn his truth into a lie.[[2]](#footnote-2)”

Moses makes this clear in Beth-peor to the Israelites, “Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but *saw no form*;there was only a voice…therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw *no form* on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by *making a carved image for yourselves*, in the form of any figure…” (Deut. 4:12, 15-16). Because they saw no image of God, the Israelites were to *make* no image of God, in *any* form (vs. 17-18). After stressing the majesty and greatness of God, Isaiah asks, “To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare him with?” Isaiah asks a rhetorical question; the answer is “nothing”. But he answers “An idol!” (Isaiah 40:18-19). He shows that when man tries to make an image of God, he falls into idolatry. In case they didn’t get it, God asks again, “To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike?” (Isaiah 46:5). Lest the Athenians think the previous passages were for the Jews alone, or from the Old Covenant, Paul says “Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.” (Acts 17:29)

But some might object, “Has not God manifested himself in the bush, the smoke, the fire, the dove, the bronze serpent, or the men that visited Abraham?” The simple answer is of course that these are God’s representations, not man’s. Calvin naturally has a little more to say: “…all the signs he ever employed were in apt accordance with the scheme of doctrine, and, at the same time, gave plain intimation of his incomprehensible essence. For the cloud, and smoke, and flame, though they were symbols of heavenly glory, curbed men’s minds as with a bridle, that they might not attempt to penetrate farther.” [[3]](#footnote-3) Calvin goes on to say that even Moses was refused permission to behold the face of God: “but you cannot see my face” (Exodus 33:20). These signs were given in such a way as only to point to God, not to be an absolute representation of him. The column of smoke, the *brief* appearance of the dove, the fire that did not consume: these signs did not shout out “I am God!” as do the vain idols and graven images of man; rather they pointed to God in all his glory, each sign stressing some divine attribute.

Seeing then that the representation of God is forbidden in Scripture *because* of man’s idolatrous heart, one must resolve to focus his art on some facet of God, not God himself. God forbids any attempt to represent him in an image because it inevitably leads to idolatry. However, the divine representations of God mentioned earlier (the bush, the smoke, etc.) only point to God, and are a fair target for man’s art, for they have been shown to man once without idolatry; a representation of this occurrence is no sin.

The astute objector will quickly note, however, that Jesus Christ is fully man. What of his person? Is it subject to the same restrictions as his divinity? As Christ had and has a fully human body, alike unto the rest of mankind’s, it seems permissible to speculate as to his appearance and to put it into art, just as one guesses at the visage of Augustus Caesar, as long as it is duly noted that it is not God that is here represented, but Christ in the flesh. Christ, as human, experienced everything any other human undergoes and had the same restrictions any other human has. But God, as Spirit, has none of the restrictions that the form chosen to represent him artistically must of necessity have. For example, if God is painted as a lion, while the good traits of a lion – strength, courage, majesty – are surely evidenced in God, other traits are not. God is *not* a lion; he is not contained to a four-footed, 550 pound mammal with a giant beard. Not only is God *not* much of what the lion is, the *lion* is not most of what God is. As soon as God is reduced to such a creature, man’s perception of God becomes limited to only the traits shown in the lion. That is not to say that a painting of a lion – painted as a lion, and not as God – may not be analogous to some parts of God.

As a further example, consider Michelangelo’s painting of creation[[4]](#footnote-4) in which God is pictured as grey-bearded elderly man. Contrast this with a picture[[5]](#footnote-5) of Gandalf from Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings. Both images are similar, but the former limits God to a bearded old man. In the latter, Gandalf could be said to be bearing God’s image in that some of God’s traits are represented in him. The distinction between the two relationships is crucial; for one recreates God in the image of man (or something else), while the other shows God’s characteristics echoing and rebounding throughout his creation. The former representation claims to be God; the latter only showcases his truth.

It has been shown then that when “divine” is restricted to God alone and a distinct differentiation is made between Christ’s two natures, one cannot make an artistic representation of any “divine being” unless he looks to other forms of art or a looser definition of “divine.”

One might suggest the cherubim of the Bible; they seem to associate with the divine and could be termed divine beings. Since statues of them are made for the temple by Solomon (1 Kings 6:23) under God’s commands, others could do the same. But Ezekiel calls the cherubim “living creatures” (Ezekiel 10:15), not “divine beings.” Alternatively, the seraphim seem to occupy a higher position on the celestial spectrum (Isaiah 6:1-6) than their earthly counterparts, but complementing this higher “ranking” is no apparent permission to portray such beings in artistic image.

It would seem then, all divine beings having been exhausted, that no artistic image of any divine being may be formed; much less may one be formed without idolatry, for that is the motive for such a restriction.

The ambiguity of “artistic,” however, leaves room for more than just imagery (painting, drawing, sculpting, etc.). Poetry, music – such art forms can and do represent God. One need only turn to the Psalms of David or the Proverbs of Solomon to see this. Psalm 17:8 says “Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings,” Psalm 18:2 calls him “my rock and my fortress…my shield,” and Psalm 27:1 calls him “my light.” Yet God has neither wings nor eyes nor is he a fortress or a shield or a rock, he is Spirit (John 4:24). But David – a human – through the inspiration of the Spirit here *represents* God in poetry and music.[[6]](#footnote-6) In this form of art then – in poetry, music and literature (see Paul’s metaphor in 1 Corinthians 10:4) – can man represent God, for it is this same means that God has chosen to convey his word to us. Just as God communicates his truth through his Word, so man may spread it through words. God’s people walk by faith, which comes from hearing (Romans 10:17), not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

So, though God forbids any “graven image” of his immaterial Spirit, he allows words to echo his Word, to spread his truth, to analogize his person. It is words man must use to represent God, for it is words God has used to represent himself. While imagery is forbidden, poetry, music, and literature are not. It is these man must use, and use wisely, to rightly represent God in an artistic, non-idolatrous fashion. ♠

# Bibliography

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1. *Insitutes,* 1.11.1 (pg. 50) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Institutes*, 1.11.3 (pg. 51) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/64/Creaci%C3%B3n_de_Ad%C3%A1n_%28Miguel_%C3%81ngel%29.jpg> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.deviantart.com/download/193206766/gandalf_the_grey_by_lucasgraciano-d3713am.jpg> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Psalms were meant to be sung, remember? No really, go look. 99% of them are “to the choirmaster” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)