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Jesusbilden i samtiden

Ungdomars receptioner av
nio samtida Kristusbilder



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

Akademisk avhandling för avläggande av filosofie
doktorsexamen i religionsvetenskap vid Göteborgs
universitet, som med tillstånd av humanistiska fakul-
tetsnämnden, kommer att offentligens försvaras lör-
dagen den 23 oktober 2010, kl. 10.15 i Lilla hörsalen,
Humanisten, Renströmsgatan 6, Göteborg.

Abstract

University of Gothenburg, Sweden, 2010

Marie Fahlén: *Jesusbilden i samtiden. Ungdomars receptioner av samtida Kristusbilder [The Image of Jesus in Our Contemporaries. Young Peoples Reception of Contemporary Images of Christ]*

Ph. D. thesis in Swedish with English summary, 290. pp.

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Series: Skrifter utgivna vid Institutionen för litteratur, idéhistoria och religion, Göteborgs universitet, 40

ISSN: 1102-9773

ISBN: 978-91-88348-39-5

This dissertation focuses on the reactions of sixteen young men and women to nine two-dimensional images of Christ in a multi-religious context. For purposes of analysis, these reactions are then placed in critical dialogue with the Christian theology of images. The participants, most of whom attended a so-called multi-cultural high school in Gothenburg, were 18 to 20 years of age and had a variety of relations to the Christian faith: five were Christian, three were Muslim and the remainder were either atheists, agnostics or “spiritual seekers”. The images employed in the study were created between 1998 and 2005 and were available on the Internet for either illustrative or pecuniary purposes. They were selected because they were thought to reflect the heterogeneity of contemporary visual representations of Christ and to serve as a starting point for subsequent interviews with respondents.

The methodological approach is to make a hermeneutical phenomenological analysis of the experiences, reactions and interpretations of the respondents in their encounter with these images and to use a particular semiotic method to examine the receipt of the images’ different levels of embedded meaning.

In relation to this, the study identifies three aspects of contemporary multi-religious society that pose a challenge to the Christian theology of images—features that serve as a background to the specific questions used to analyze the material in dialogue with Christian theology. Put succinctly, these concern the fact that in contemporary Western society: 1) visual representations of the Jesus figure tend to be heterogeneous in character, created for varied individual purposes and independent of the traditional interpretive authority of the church; 2) individuals tend to independently construct their own faith-based belief systems outside of religious institutions, leading to an increased religious pluralism that is further enhanced by the impact of migration; and, 3) visual communication tends to be particularly emphasized to the detriment of a didactic theology of images which relies upon textual discourse in its representational teaching of the gospel. From the perspective of this study, the challenge posed by these three features of contemporary Western society is also linked to a decrease in religious (i.e., Christian) socialization.

The contemporary (post-secular) tendency towards complex and heterogeneous interpretations of the image of Jesus, exemplified by the wide spectrum of interpretations found in the present study, calls into question the preferential right of Christian communities to interpret Christian iconography and challenges the interpretive authority of the church. This circumstance highlights the need for critical theological reflection on questions such as how to define “tradition” and whether to accept sources that fall outside the compass of formal Christian authority.

Key words: Contemporary images of Christ, Theology of images, Interpretation, Qualitative interviews, Critical hermeneutics, Multi-religious society, Post secular.