The unseen is marked as unavailable to direct sight. Subject to manifold restrictions, its representation is a complicated and contested matter. This yields a wide spectrum of stances and habitual attitudes, from appraisals of iconic images that represent the divine, to their dismissal as ‘idols’, from the embracing of visual signs alluding to the divine without suggesting likeness, to an indifferent attitude towards visual forms. And yet, scholarship in the study of Christianity (and Judaism and Islam) is still indebted to the idea that the interdiction of representational images of the divine is the normative default. Calling attention to the margins of Christianity, where idolatry charges and iconoclasm arise with regard to the cult objects and images in indigenous religious traditions, this lecture argues that it is necessary to open up towards a broader range of possibilities with regard to visual regimes devoted to the figuration of the unseen from a position ‘beyond the second commandment’.

The first part offers a critique of Bruno Latour’s emphasis on the Calvinist interpretation of this commandment, echoed also in the work of W. J. T. Mitchell. The second part turns to the German strand of art history known as Bildwissenschaft, which offers important alternative takes on images and the theologies in which they are embedded. Taking these approaches as a point of departure, the third part studies clashing figurations of the unseen in the export of the notion of idolatry produced by German Protestant missionaries to the Ewe in West Africa. The indigenous deities of the Ewe, which traditionally became tangible through other objects than images, were recast in Protestant religion as idols, and so dismissed as demonic. Having been produced through charges of idolatry, these recast indigenous figures continuously require to be pictured. Even the rejection of images requires a sound understanding of their use and appeal.

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