
Cleaning House

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By the mid 8th century the debate concerning the place of visual images in Christian life and worship came to a dramatic climax. Our focus will be on the Eastern Roman Empire –what is called the Byzantine Empire-- between 730 and 843. The resolution of the question of the images was accompanied by violence: violence inflicted on Christians by Christians and not by a pagan imperial ruler. We are, of course, referring to the *iconoclastic controversy*.¹

The term *iconoclasm* literally means *image breaking* and “refers to a recurring historical impulse to break or destroy images for religious or political reasons.”² Iconoclasm occurs around the world for various religious and political reasons even today; most recently, the Taliban destruction of ancient Buddhist images in Pakistan. But the instance of

iconoclasm we are interested in began in 730 with an edict by Emperor Leo III ordering the removal of religious images from all churches [45]. What followed was a huge upheaval in religious and political life which resulted in the destruction of much important religious art and the persecution of those who made, and those who venerated, icons. The Council of Constantinople in 754 endorsed iconoclasm but, later, in 780 the Empress Irene discontinued the iconoclastic policy continued by Leo’s successors and that created a lull in the destruction and persecution. In 787 the Council of Nicaea overturned and reversed the 754 council’s decrees by declaring the earlier council’s ruling “a detestable error.”³ Emperor Leo V, however, reinstated iconoclasm in 813 as the result of the Council of Constantinople followed by yet another reversal when Empress Theodora finally restored religious art in 843. With that the Iconoclastic period came to an end. It

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Leo’s soldiers take down the image of Christ.

“The populace of the Imperial City, being greatly distressed by the new doctrines, planned to attack him [Leo III], and they killed some of the Emperor’s men who had taken down the image of our Lord that was over the great Bronze Gate [the entrance to the Imperial Palace]. As a result, many of them underwent punishment for the sake of true religion, namely mutilation, scouring, banishment and fines.” —Theophanes



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It flared up again during the period of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. It is no doubt true that some suffered martyrdom at the hands of *iconoclasts* (image breakers). There are recorded instances of blindings, burnings, and amputations but how widespread that kind of violent persecution was is not known. Basil the Confessor, now a saint in the Orthodox Church, was tortured by Emperor Leo III. He had been imprisoned along with his pupil for venerating icons. After Leo died Basil was released and continued to live for nine years. There is little evidence of an official, systematic widespread destruction of images during the iconoclastic period.⁵ This is an important point as it would seem that the winners of the controversy would have not only reported instances of destruction and violence by the iconoclasts but would have done so exhaustively. But we should not minimize the violence that accompanied the controversy. People were persecuted and the destruction of images was significant even if it does not seem to have been systematic.

Possible reasons for the outbreak of iconoclasm

Why? Why this ban on images? Why this violent reaction? Christians had both criticized and used religious images throughout most of Christianity's existence but the issue had never erupted into violence. Why now?

It's another one of those questions for which there are a couple of possible answers.

John Lowden, in helping us to understand the Byzantine world, suggests in his book on early Christian and Byzantine art that we adopt, for the purpose of understanding the thinking of the time, a view of history closer to that of the people living in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries. Their worldview was framed theologically. As history moves farther and farther away from the creation of the world and the incarnation of the Son of God and the resurrection of Christ, things get worse, not better. While we in the 21st century look forward to the future and expect progress "they dreaded the future and the prospect of the Last Judgment,

but looked back with admiration to the past..."⁶ They had a *doom and gloom* worldview. They expected things to go wrong and when things did go wrong they did not hesitate to point a finger at those who were at fault. So, when things would go bad, they looked to theological reasons for explanations.



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Statues of "Santa Justa" and "Santa Rufina" in a Portugal church; 2006

And, in the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, things *were* going bad. By 730 the empire had become a ghost of its former self with the western half pretty much lost to barbarians. In the Holy Land the Persians had captured the holy city of Jerusa-

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A parishioner venerates an icon on her way into an Orthodox church.



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“Madonna Nicopeia” (Our Lady of Victory); protectress of Venice.

During moments of crisis it was the Madonna Nicopeia that was publicly carried in procession in Venice to ask for deliverance from the plague and for success in war. An icon of the Theotokos was twice processed on the city walls of Constantinople to lift sieges.



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An image of Mary is processed through the narrow streets of Toledo, Spain during the month of May, 2006.

An image of Mary is processed through the narrow streets of Toledo, Spain during the month of May, 2006. Throughout the Roman Catholic world the entire month of May every year is dedicated to the Virgin Mother.



lem. Constantinople itself had been besieged twice. There had been outbreaks of plague and, finally, a terrible earthquake in 726. There was the constant threat of Islam. Things were not looking good thus confirming the world view of the Byzantines.⁷ And all of those bad things had happened after the Byzantine Emperor Justinian had spent lavishly on artistic productivity around the empire creating lots of images and decorating very elaborate new churches.⁸

In fact, the empire was now awash in religious images [46]. It looked as if images of Christ, Mary and the saints had simply traded places with the pagan idols of centuries before. Religious images and icons were, seemly, everywhere and their veneration looked exactly like the worship that had been given to the pagan idols. Certain rituals were common in the veneration of Christian icons as had been the case with pagan idols including “prostrating oneself before the image and the placing of candles about the base of the painting.”⁹ [47] Some people believed in the magical quality of icons. One woman ate the paint of an image of two saints and claimed to be cured of an ailment as a result, and another woman lowered an image of a saint into a dry well and immediately the well filled with water.¹⁰ Some icons protected cities.¹¹ Twice an image of the *Theotokos* (*God bearer* –the Virgin Mary) had to be paraded on the ramparts of Constantinople to protect the city from enemies at its gates [48]. Icon lovers also paraded with images of the saints [49] on the saints’ feast days to celebrate the anniversary

dates of saints’ deaths (“celebrated” because the day of a saint’s death marked his entrance into the glory of eternal life with God).

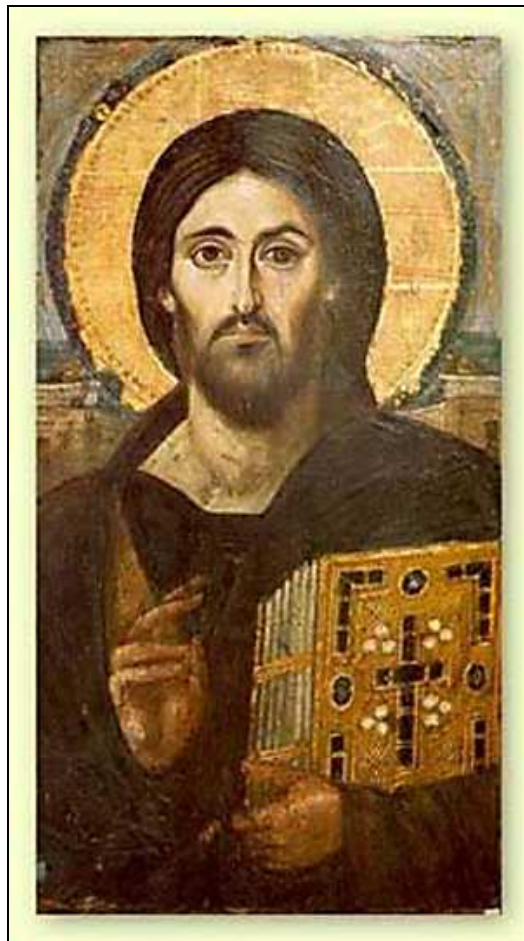
You can see where we’re going with all this. The people have fallen back into their pagan ways and the Last Judgment looms just ahead so the only way to get right again is to resort to a good house cleaning the Old Testament way, with a smashing of idols!¹² The old arguments against religious images took on a new urgency and those who had been preaching against religious images for years adopted an “I told you so”

attitude.

There were other possible reasons for Emperor Leo III's iconoclastic edict that weren't quite so biblical. The Church by this time had become very powerful. Monasteries, especially, had become centers of power and wealth as thousands of pilgrims traveled to them to venerate highly esteemed, even miraculous, icons. If the emperor could diminish the power of the Church and the monasteries by eliminating the attraction of the icons, he could gain the upper hand in that power struggle.¹³ The Emperor's personal upbringing may also have played a part—a slightly more religiously oriented one-- in his decision to prohibit the use of images. He grew up in southeastern Anatolia, near the Arab frontier, so he may have been influenced by the anti-representational outlook of Oriental culture.¹⁴ Islam's policy regarding images was without ambiguity. When Emperor Justinian II added the face of Jesus to the back of his gold coin an Islamic caliph suspended use of the Byzantine coins and instituted his own currency without images.¹⁵

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“Christ Pantokrator” icon
from the Monastery of St.
Catherine in Sinai; mid 6th c.



The theological arguments

The arguments on both sides of the icon controversy had been around since the earliest Christian period so there wasn't really anything new on the table to discuss. Regarding theological issues, it would seem that those opposed to icons had a clear-cut case and that no argument in favor of icons could possibly prevail. The *iconodules*' (those who defended the use of icons) strongest argument in a *clear-cut* vein wasn't theological, but historical. They claimed the use of images could be traced all the way back to Christ himself, claiming that the apostles had commissioned portraits and decorated churches with religious images of Christ even before the Gospels had been written.¹⁶ But, as we have seen, that was not

true. Christian images didn't appear until about 200.

There was one truth which both sides shared and it was theological: Jesus was the Logos, the *true image* of God.¹⁷ [50] Whoever had seen Jesus had seen the Father. But the two sides had conflicting views of the nature of *images*. In the iconoclast view a *true image* was a union of the material substance with its model (*prototype*) –“a kind of magical double”.¹⁸ The substances of the material (paint, stone, etc.) had to co-exist with the substances of Christ, Mary, and the saints. To the iconoclasts, only the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist could come closest to being a *true image* of Christ. That being the case, icons could not be *true* and to venerate them would be idolatry. The Orthodox held the opposing view: images are symbols of their models, merely reproducing the *semblance* of the person and not the *substance* of the person.

Therefore, any veneration paid to the image passed through the image/icon to the real, *substantial* person.

How, then, was the veneration of icons different from the worship of idols? Surely the veneration paid to idols also passed to the god or goddess. John, Bishop of Thessalonica, had an answer: “We (*Christians*)... make images of men who have existed and have had



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“*Miracle of the Angel at Chonai*”, ca. 1175, Monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai

bodies... we do nothing incongruous in depicting them such as they have been. We do not invent anything as you (*pagans*) do...”¹⁹ Pagan gods and goddesses didn’t actually exist so veneration did not pass through to a real model but “terminated”²⁰ on the material substance of the artist’s invention/image –hence, an *idol*. How about angels? [51] They don’t have bodies and yet are depicted in icons. Bishop John has an answer: the angels have “a fine body of an aerial nature, as it is written: ‘Who maketh his angels spirits, his ministers a flaming fire’”²¹ In addition, the angels have been seen in human form as that is how they have always been sent to those God has chosen to receive messages.²²

The most profound argument of the Orthodox position however revolves around the doctrine of the incarnation. It is the incarnation of the Son of God that makes it permissible –in a certain sense, mandatory-- to venerate an icon of Christ. Not to venerate the icon “would imply that Jesus was not also fully God, or to deny that Jesus had a real physical body”.²³

“By becoming incarnate, the Son of God introduced a new ‘economy’ of images.”²⁴ The God who had prohibited the making of graven images because it would be an attempt by his creatures to bridge the impossible gulf between God and man had taken the initiative and bridged that gulf

himself by taking on human flesh. He who was invisible made himself visible and did so in a specific, individual, historical person --Jesus of Nazareth.²⁵ An icon of Christ is, therefore, an “image of the image” of God. Further, all those “alive in Christ” are *deified*, as the Eastern Orthodox say. Mary and the saints (and all faithful Christians) share in the humanity and divinity of Christ –the true image of the Father. The veneration given to icons of Mary and the saints is therefore appropriate as the humanity depicted is that deified by the incarnation and the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. The veneration passes to Christ and through him to the Father.

The iconoclastic controversy resulted in a rich understanding of the doctrine of the incarnation and the implications for religious imagery was huge.

As we have seen, up to this point the church had not adopted any official policy regarding religious images. The issue had always been discussed but it took the challenge of iconoclasm to cause the church to formulate a theological framework.²⁶ Actually, a local church council in Elvira, Spain [ca. 302 or as late as 324] had, in fact, adopted a canon [Canon 36] prohibiting placing pictures in churches “so that they do not become objects of worship and adoration” but some researchers feel that the canon forbade images not for theological reasons but so that new or weak converts would not be scandalized by certain superstitious excesses in no way approved by the ecclesiastical authority;²⁷ also, so that pagans could not caricature sacred scenes and ideas.

Before we end this part let us take note here that the position advocated and acted upon by the Byzantine-Roman emperors regarding icons ended up being overruled by the Church. The first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great, had also been on the losing side in a religious debate; the Council of Nicaea declared Arianism a heresy. Arianism had been favored by Constantine. This should give pause to those who claim that the Christian Church was infiltrated/influenced/highjacked and carried into apostasy with the cooperation of church authorities beginning with the ascendancy of Constantine. While the Church adopted some imperial trappings its influential theologians and bishops, for the most part, remained vigilant regarding doctrine and refused to bend to imperial pressures.

By the time the iconoclastic controversy came to an end the Byzantine empire was experiencing a reversal of fortunes in its favor and so the permanent reappearance of religious imagery did not meet with significant resistance.

Besides, the Church had spoken –finally.✠

¹ For our purposes an icon is any image of Christ, Mary, a saint or saints, but, commonly, it refers to an encaustic painting (colored melted wax used as paint) on a wood panel. Size can vary from a few inches up to larger than life size.

² The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Icons and Iconoclasm in Byzantium*, (New York: 2000-2007) August 25, 2007, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/icon/hd_icon.htm>

³ John Lowden, *Early Christian & Byzantine Art*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997) 157

⁴ Wikipedia, *Basil the Confessor*, (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.), 16:54, 6 February 2007, 21:07 August 30, <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basil_the_Confessor>

⁵ Lowden 165

⁶ Lowden 7

⁷ Lowden 154

⁸ Lowden 154

⁹ James Snyder, *Medieval Art—Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4th-14th Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989) 126-127

¹⁰ Lowden 149

¹¹ Snyder 128

¹² “We refrain, however, from calling them idols (referring to icons) since there is a distinction between kinds of evil.” *Definition of the Iconoclastic Council of 815* as preserved in a treatise of the Patriarch Nicephorus.

¹³ Snyder 128

¹⁴ Snyder 128

¹⁵ Robin Cormack, *Writing in Gold, Byzantine Society and Its Icons*, (London: George Philip, 1985)

¹⁶ Cyril Mango, ed., *The Art Of The Byzantine Empire 312 – 1453: Sources and Documents*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000) 176

¹⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, (New Haven and London; Yale University Press, 1999) 85

¹⁸ Mango 150

¹⁹ Mango 140

²⁰ The term is used by St. Thomas Aquinas in explaining the veneration given to God through images: “The movement toward the image does not terminate in its image but tends toward that whose image it is.”, as cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, trans. United States Catholic Conference, Inc.--Libreria Editrice Vaticana, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1994) 517

²¹ Cyril Mango 140, (*Psalm 104*)

²² Cyril Mango 140

²³ Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., *Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox Understanding of the Use of Images*, 16:30 28 July 2007, 17:10 14 August 2007, <www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idolatry_in_Christianity>

²⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 516

²⁵ Pelikan 85

²⁶ Pelikan 92

²⁷ Arthur S. Barnes, Transcribed by Gerald M. Knight, *Council of Elvira*, The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume V. Published 1909, (New York: Robert Appleton Company) New Advent 2007, 13:03 August 31 2007,

<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05395b.htm>>