

Historical Revisionism and Contemporary Iconoclasm: A Secular Problem?

Sergei P. Brun

The cruel murder of George Floyd and the ensuing Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality and systemic racism have added fuel to ongoing culture wars, debates on social justice, and calls for a wide-ranging revision of the historic and cultural landscape. How does this wide-ranging social upheaval correlate to the history and contemporary self-understanding of Eastern Christianity? The Eastern Churches—that is, the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Communion, the Eastern Rite Catholics and the Assyrians—constitute a significant part of the religious world, but how equipped are we, historically and morally, to defend the integrity of Christian faith, and an honest Christian approach to contemporary sociopolitical and cultural challenges?

For Christians aiming to tread a thoughtful and responsible path through the volatile debates currently unfolding, the history of the Church's own historical awareness and its experience with iconoclasm can provide a vital road map, but only if we are prepared for an honest confrontation with our own tradition. This article examines three aspects of the contemporary clashes: historical revisionism, the pursuit of emotional or spiritual comfort and safety, and the problem of forgiving and accepting transgressors. Each of these three issues is illustrated by examples from the history of the

Christian East. For what we now see as an exclusively secular discourse is neither, in its essence, secular, nor alien to our Eastern Christian experience.

History: Context Is Everything

Let us start with history.

Few reference the hallowed authority of history as often as politicians and religious groups. And few things bring as much pain to a scholar or student of history as these (usually self-righteous) political and religious “musings” on history.

The ultimate flaw of these narratives—conservative and liberal, religious and secular—is the cherry-picking of “facts,” of achievements or grievances of the past, with total disregard for historical accuracy and, especially, historical context. Needless to say, context is everything, as the great Archimandrite Robert F. Taft used to say. Context brings complexity and makes it impossible for the ideologue to cherry-pick facts at will. Historical revisionism and ideologically pseudohistory rests on two pillars: messianism and victimization. Past and present oppression are seen as justifying messianic rights to compensation and redemption.

Eastern Christianity, too, has “historical narratives” that are, for the most

part, shamelessly substituted for genuine historical knowledge and memory. In the Church we find the very same constructed, hopelessly ideological patterns that we see in the secular liberal-versus-conservative discourse. The essential storyline is about a Church and its peoples striving through the centuries to preserve the pure, unchanged (!) faith and tradition of the past, beset on all fronts by attacks from the East and the West, suffering from Latin, Ottoman, and Communist persecution. The truth is that the Eastern Orthodox have shed more than enough blood in ~offensive~ wars and campaigns of persecution. A short list would include the fierce persecution of the Non-Chalcedonians and Latins within the Byzantine Empire, the Byzantine reconquest of the Levant and Bulgaria in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Muscovite conquests of the “Tartar” realms, the persecution of the Old Believers in Russia, the fight for and against the Union with Rome in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, the Balkan Wars, the Eastern Front of World War II, and the twenty-first century wars in Georgia and Ukraine. All of these chapters have included crimes that the involved communities still prefer to ignore, lie about, or eradicate from their historical memory.

The Church of Rome, through the pontiffs of the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, has asked for forgiveness for past crimes committed against the Eastern Orthodox, the Jews, the Protestants, and the Muslims. Conspicuously, the Eastern Orthodox hierarchy quite comfortably refrains from doing the same, bringing up the Crusaders’ Sack of Constantinople of 1204 but ignoring the Massacre of the Latins in 1182, demanding “compensation” from Rome for the mere existence (let alone the restoration) of Byzantine Rite Catholic Churches, and

refusing to acknowledge publicly the Orthodox Church’s role in the Russian Imperial and later Communist “liquidation” of the Byzantine Catholics in Eastern Europe. The Eastern Orthodox local churches have made little or no effort to condemn what was done by their adherents, even against their own coreligionists. We have not seen joint Orthodox conferences of Bulgarians and Greeks, Bulgarians and Serbs, Georgians and Ossetians, or Russians and Ukrainians that would address military crimes committed by their compatriots and coreligionists against each other in the wars of even the past 120 years. Hierarchs and spokesmen of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad are still far more outspoken in their criticisms of Father Alexander Schmemmann’s theology than of their own church’s collaboration with the Third Reich and of the praise bestowed by their former primate Metropolitan Anastasius on Adolf Hitler. The closest we came to apologies for any grievances were through the Catholic–Eastern Orthodox, Catholic–Oriental Orthodox, and the Orthodox Chalcedonian–Non-Chalcedonian theological dialogues (the Balamand Declaration being one of the milestones). But the decisions of these dialogues remain largely unimplemented, as evidenced by the widespread uses of the problematic terms “Monophysite” and “Uniate” by both “liberal” and “fundamentalist” Eastern Orthodox.

When it comes to personal piety, a Christian—especially an Eastern-Rite Christian—typically begs God to have mercy on him or her, as the last sinner, as ~the~ sinner (τον αμαρτωλόν). Yet when it comes to the collective assessment of one’s local church, nation, or tradition, Eastern-Rite Christians are often ready to start foaming at the mouth in vanity, to defend the righteousness and suffering of their peo-

ple. One cannot help but notice that the seeming desire for personal penance, both religious and secular (whether one prefers to call it *metanoia* or “wokeness”), is often proportionally “compensated” by a striking inability to apply the same critical treatment to one’s chosen collective, whether a church, a political party, or a cultural movement. A conservative, Trump-supporting former Evangelical who finds a safe haven in Orthodoxy will readily criticize the fall of the Western world (to which the person in fact belongs), yet will blithely idolize everything that has to do with his or her “chosen” culture: all icons and churches will be “beautiful”, all elders sacred and wise, the Orthodox Church in its historic path and current state immaculate and infallible. By the same token, a far-left “woke” activist will chastise Western civilization and readily apologize for almost everything—except for the excesses, violence, and ideological extremism of his own chosen political compatriots. This we have clearly seen in the fact that neither Black Lives Matter representatives nor most major liberal networks or media outlets have properly addressed or condemned violent or vandalizing acts (such as the attacks of “social justice” activists on the peacefully praying Catholics in St. Louis, or the disruption of the mass in Las Vegas) committed in the name of Black Lives Matter, effectively ceding that condemnation to Rupert Murdoch’s pundits.

We must accept responsibility for the violence coming from ourselves, from our families, and from our own political and religious groups. We may not be responsible for every bad act committed in the name of our state, religion, or political entity, but we have an obligation to condemn the pernicious actions of our closest compatriots openly. This is the only way to count-

er escalating polarization. It is also the proper Christian response. And it is sad to see so many Eastern-Rite Christians—including many on the “right” and some on the “left”—merely adding to the cultural divide, not allowing for any self-criticism or genuine, collective *metanoia*.

Emotional Comfort and the Resurgence of Iconoclasm

While it is a moral obligation of society—and especially Christians—to aid those in need or oppressed, to protect their well-being, this is in no way equivalent to the protection of feelings. Protecting emotions is the death of freedom, for freedom of speech runs in direct and inevitable confrontation with emotional comfort. After all, there is a fine line between word and action, even between a serious threat and a joke or argument. Declaring war on “harmful” words in order to protect feelings often amounts to an attack on freedom of speech, and can

A Roman *damnatio memoriae* or “condemnation of memory.” The Severan Tondo, a wooden panel painted around AD 200, shows Emperor Septimius Severus, his wife Julia Domna, and their sons Geta and Caracalla. Later, after both brothers became emperors, Caracalla had Geta assassinated and ordered his face removed from the family portrait. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.



lead to a frenzy of iconoclasm. Unfortunately, some parts of the left are beginning to resemble radical religious movements, following in the footsteps even of our own churches when the latter imposed brutal censure and went as far as burning heretics and blasphemers at the stake. Cancel culture finds direct counterparts overseas, in the Islamic laws on blasphemy and the infamous Russian law against the “offense of religious feelings.” If the reader is inclined to think that the burning of heretics was a purely Catholic pastime, I advise him to also turn his attention to what was done by the Lutherans in Scandinavia and by the Orthodox in eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantium and in early modern Russia. Religious and Communist atheistic censure brought loss of cultural heritage, suffering, moral degradation and erosion of the censure’s proponents—not justice or moral elevation.

And let us not treat ideological iconoclasm as unavoidable. Byzantine emperors of the Isaurian and Amorian Dynasties led a vital, highly necessary policy to restore the empire’s economic and military resources, and in that regard, both the Empire and the ensuing Byzantine heritage, which lasted for hundreds more years, is entirely indebted to them. Yet no one can condone the Isaurian policy of iconoclasm, which led to the suffering of thousands and to the annihilation of an entire culture—not of iconography itself, but of encaustic production and related forms of painting and sculpture that had emerged from the Early Byzantine tradition, which had direct ties to antiquity. It is ironic that the achievements and legacy of the Isaurian emperors were themselves almost literally erased from historical memory by the victorious Iconodule party, only to be reinstated—largely

outside the Eastern Orthodox historical “memory”—by modern scholars. Iconoclasts do not fare well in history. After all, it has been a characteristic of major dictators during their reigns of terror to equate word to deed. This is something to think about when we see attempts to equate Rudyard Kipling’s poetry or Flannery O’Connor’s writings to the violence of past and present extremist groups and oppressive regimes. We cannot ignore the ensuing fight for the eradication of names and monuments. Some might call it “an honest discussion of our history.” I wholeheartedly welcome an open and honest discussion of history, but first it would be beneficial for people to take the time and to actually study it. History is a complicated field of inquiry, yet many people seem to feel it is their right to reinvent it at will. One can hardly imagine people, aside from flat-earthers and creationists, doing the same with astrophysics—or, God forbid, medicine or architecture, since we would then be dying in collapsed buildings with no effective medical aid.

Criminal versus Flawed

One of Christ’s most important parables is that of the Prodigal Son, perhaps the central narrative manifestation of the Christian belief that God reclaims the fallen. Yet this reclamation clearly has two sides: the prodigal son acknowledges his fallen state, and the father accepts his flawed and sinful child, accepting him rather than erasing him from existence or hiding him from the public eye. Puritanism, both secular and religious, seeks to blot out the “morally compromised” or flawed from the earth. In Christianity, God embraces the flawed individual and sacrifices his only-begotten Son for this broken world, instead of eradicating it and recreating it anew. We are flawed,

but we are not all harmful predators intent on committing further crimes. Here we find ourselves bound once again to the perception of our collective entity—national, religious, or political. Apologizing for the transgressions of our ancestors and making sure their past crimes are not repeated is far more productive than and different from attacking the legacy of the dead. There is a fine line between countering contemporary oppression and transferring one's efforts to the iconoclastic scourging of the delicate—and, in their delicacy, helpless—landscapes of history and culture. History is in itself the struggle of the imperfect and flawed against the vile and the decrepit. Its brighter pages are covered with victories of the lesser evil over the “greater good,” for the latter—especially in the twentieth century—proved to breed far more fanatics and claim more lives. And heritage—all heritage, good and bad, from Da Vinci's sketches to Hitler's watercolors—is either for the mob to destroy, or for museums to preserve. There is no third option.



In the Western world we now find two forms of liberalism: one that celebrates and defends diversity, and one that strives to annihilate, marginalize, and demonize those with different opinions. To me, personally, the latter is a greater threat, since it compromises liberalism just as effectively as the altright compromises conservative ideals. We are living in a post-Christian world, according to both lamenting Christian conservatives and proud secular progressives. For an Eastern Christian, however, such a statement should elicit an ironic smile. For the modern cultural movements and clashes on both sides manifest all too well the hypocrisy, crimes, and mistakes that Christians (including Eastern Christians)



Monument to the 14th-century Scottish king Robert the Bruce at the site of the Battle of Bannockburn by sculptor Charles d'Orville Pilkington Jackson, vandalized in June 2020 by self-identified Black Lives Matter activists.

have either made or lived through in the past, transgressions that were either imposed on our churches by persecutors or bestowed by our own members and hierarchs.

There are plenty of physical threats that we must counter in this world, for the love of God, for justice, for survival, and for common sense: violence, poverty, terrorism, totalitarianism, climate change. These are the real dangers. Each and every one of them demands knowledge, courage and hard work. Clearing the cultural landscape, fighting tweets, vandalizing—not merely removing—monuments, and politicizing art (as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science is now planning to do by imposing diversity quotas on movies in order to qualify for Best Picture) do not portend well for our collective ability to confront the true threats. Art, education, and most of all, the spoken word all have the sacred right to be emotionally uncomfortable, to be offensive.

The point of this article is not merely to point out that everything is and was

“bad,” but rather to emphasize the need to study our collective history: to study it, not whitewash or demonize it. Those Christian critics who think that the George Floyd protests mark a threat to or even the end of Western or Christian civilization should honestly reexamine their position: are you truly looking at an end, or are you looking in the mirror? The Christian East is so deeply engulfed in the hypocrisy and bloodshed of old that our experience—spiritual and

shameless, holy and hypocritical, beautiful and disgraceful—allows us to reflect on the current situation and share our experience. Such reflection undoubtedly should be at the core of our social mission and witness today, a witness only possible through intellectual resistance to excesses from the right and the left, through introspection, through attention to context and detail, through a refusal to demonize the opponent, and through collective metanoia. ✱



Sergei P. Brun is a Russian historian specializing in the history of the Latin East and the Church of Antioch. He is the author of several articles, papers, translations, as well as the two-volume monograph *The Byzantines and the Franks in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia* (Moscow, 2015). Currently he is a staff member at St. Thomas Institute in Moscow and a member of the editorial board of *The Historic Reporter*.

REFLECTIONS

In Laughter and Tears

Harry Wootner

Nearly all Jewish holidays can be summed up in one sentence: They tried to kill us; they failed; let's eat.

The history of the Jewish people—the religion, the race, the ethnicity, the culture—is, not to put too fine a point on it, written in blood. From a possibly mythical pharaoh thinking that the children of Israel were getting too numerous and turning them into slaves to the terrifyingly real anti-Semitism cropping up in France today, the history of the Jews has been one long story of persecution, forced conversion, and genocide, with a few

breaks for shepherding thrown in for variety. We've been blamed for everything from the Black Death to the fall of Wall Street; in dozens of nations we've been unwelcome, chased out, or killed. Some of the worst atrocities in human history have been enacted upon us, and whether we like it or not, this awareness of danger and persecution is so pervasive that it has become a central part of our identity.

Therefore, it will not surprise you to hear of Tisha B'Av, which is a commemorative day of mourning in the height of summer. We fast, sit on