Byzantine Studies, Iconoclasm, and the Rise of Islam

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While the history of the iconoclastic controversy has long occupied center stage in the currently flourishing discipline of Byzantine Studies—and has recently attracted the attention of some of the original and most seasoned scholars in the field—an authoritative survey of iconoclasm does not yet exist. Still, our knowledge of this reassessed landscape is much improved, and consensus on key aspects is often possible.

Earlier studies on the damage caused by the movement were often conflicted in their findings. Given its emotionally divisive character, the destruction to both churches and public places was generally thought to have been extensive. But a closer examination of the available documentation reveals that this was not always the case. Archaeological evidence from Constantinople, for example, is relatively modest. Apart from the patriarch's private rooms off the gallery of the Hagia Sophia, where figural mosaics were finally removed in 769, little was destroyed. In Thessaloniki, by contrast, the apse of Hosios David, with its well-known beardless Christ (sixth century), was preserved by being carefully concealed, indicating that people were clearly aware of the government's agenda but were willing to circumvent its ban if they could. Crucially, some figures in the city's Cathedral of St. Demetrios and in the Rotunda of Galerius were also left undisturbed. Religious figurative art certainly did not vanish during the iconoclast period, and evidence for persecution and for the cessation of image manufacture is circumstantial as well. There is, for instance, almost no proof of martyrdom under Leo III, and the production of images, which the ban would also have proscribed, did not cease outright.

If the state's iconoclastic campaign—both in the capital and beyond—was rarely well-organized, then iconoclasm in practice would seem for the most part to have been intermittent, if not fitfully thrown together. Revisionist scholarship has offered evidence that both the persecution and the resulting damage were exaggerated, suggesting that pro-image apologists were in part to blame for the severity of historical reporting. Since members of the iconodule faction were the authors of much of the surviving historical record, it is likely that they could have been tempted to magnify their enemies' vandalism and ability to persecute. The fact that the "editors" of these texts have been roundly criticized for their attempt to rewrite history is not surprising. Still, we should also admit that iconoclast sympathizers were inclined to do the same. The hostility characterizing both sides was intense and real, and setting it aside would be a mistake.

The intellectual identification of figural art with idolatry was a critical component of the iconoclast controversy, a fact that is generally well-known. Even so, modern research demonstrates that the historical and theological narratives essential to both supporters and detractors of image veneration were neither isolated from other contemporary events nor a sufficient cause of the controversy. Of greater importance was the parlous geopolitical situation of the Byzantine Empire. In plain English, the greatest issue of the day was neither iconoclasm nor theology but the very survival of the Byzantine polity.

The backdrop to this Byzantine crisis was the sudden rise of Islam. Thanks to swift Muslim conquests, the empire managed to lose half of its territory by the 650s. The contraction of frontiers, population, and tax revenue, together with overall violent demographic changes, soon proved irreversible; even the Byzantine capital became an object of frequent blockade. These attacks continued well into the eighth century, pointedly underlining the danger facing the empire. Arab armies also launched annual incursions into Anatolia, and even challenged Byzantine power at sea. Equally unsettling were contemporary Slavic migrations and settlements in the Balkans. Furthermore, the empire was forced to contend with major natural disasters, including an astonishing volcanic eruption on the island of Thera in 726. Byzantium's network of cities, which had provided the empire with its extraordinary economic power and resiliency, also began to suffer slow, erratic modifications, and many of its ancient urban centers were gradually transformed into villages and fortresses. For the Byzantine world, the instability triggered by the swift ascension of the rival Arab realm was an uncommonly traumatic challenge, leaving the empire practically destroyed to the point of extinction before beginning a stabilization and recovery in the ninth century.

An illuminated Psalter depicts the iconoclasts, with their pots of whitewash, as the equivalent of the soldiers who tormented and crucified Christ. Chludov Psalter (c. 850–75), Moscow, Hist. Mus. MS. D.29 folio 67r.

Given these facts, reducing the importance of iconoclastic theology to a minimum is not surprising. Overall, the age was a historical watershed, whereas the image-breaking quarrel was only a peripheral turning point. According to this view, the decree against images issued by the state in 730 should be placed primarily within the broader historical context of the Arab victories. The emperors were doubtless convinced that the popular devotion to images was to blame for the empire's military defeats and natural disasters. God was effectively punishing Christians by favoring the

The Emperor Leo (seated) debates iconoclasm with his clergy, while iconoclasts whitewash an image of Christ: meanwhile, two bishops venerate a sacred image. Theodore Psalter, British Library, B.M. Add. 19.352.

enemy's armies. The issue for the empire was never truly a theological concern; the imperial ban proscribing images had more to do with the empire's survival strategy and the grave political situation of the time. Some historians have even argued that iconoclasm began to recede just as the Arab danger began to wane. With the decrease of the strategic threat posed by expansive Islamic conquests, the state ban against images was no longer politically necessary. In brief, the stage was set for the restoration of the holy images that took place on the first Sunday of Lent in 843. In this formulation, the classic position—that iconoclasm was a commanding issue of the day, divorced from issues of statecraft—no longer seems compelling.

Yet it might be better to recognize that this subject has both strictly theological *and* historical importance. For starters, the scholarly conviction that a religious frame of reference was foisted on the entire iconoclastic period should be qualified. How exactly religious questions supposedly dimmed the lights on the entire Byzantine historical landscape, as it is increasingly cheerfully claimed, is rarely explained. Jaroslav Pelikan's suggestion that historians also need to be theologically responsible has never been more to the point. A brief look at some of the older secondary literature, with its broader emphasis (for example, scholarship from George Ostrogorsky) provides a good demonstration supporting Pelikan's admonition.

To begin with, the use of the visual arts in the Church and the admissibility of graphically portraying God had been a subject of debate long before iconoclasm became established state policy. Iconoclasm was not an unknown theological question: "Thou shall not make graven images" is, after all, one of the Decalogue commandments. Questions about graphically depicting the divine had roots deep within Christianity since before the rise of Islam. As the discussion of this issue at the Council in Trullo in 692 pointedly alerts us, concerns over whether it was appropriate to depict Christ in any particular way were clearly still on the table. Crucially, in the end, the council approved of the figurative portrait of Christ in preference to symbolic representation, a position codified in Canon 82.

Significantly, this decision was not solely an ecclesial matter. The emperor Justinian II also approved it, and shortly after the council adjourned, he decided to depart from the state's

prevailing numismatic tradition by issuing the first image of Christ on Byzantine coinage. The obverse, or front side, of gold coins was henceforth to be used for Christ's image, while the imperial portrait was consigned to the reverse, or back side. As a clear departure from established practice, the change was a genuine iconographic innovation. Its effective substitution of Christ's portrait in place of the imperial image was nothing short of revolutionary. But so was its implication: namely, that the source of the emperor's authority was Christ himself. Quite possibly, the imperial ruling was also meant to provoke. The depiction of the divine on the gold nomisma would have been theologically unacceptable to Muslims, and it presumably would have been noticed.

Less revolutionary, perhaps, but no less important was the subsequent implicit approval of Canon 82 by Patriarch Germanos I. His decision to embrace this decree—in opposition to the Byzantine state's polemic against images at the time—pointedly shifted the emphasis to the historic Christ. Germanos' stance, it is widely agreed, meant that future debate on this question would focus on the enduring reality of Christ's humanity. This Christological approach, crucially, also linked up with controversies that had loomed large in the early history of the Church, and which were above all Christologically driven. As the patriarch aptly put it, Christ must be portrayed in his "visible theophany," which is to say in his human form, and not by symbols. The fact that some of these developments took place before the broad outbreak of iconoclasm is important; it demonstrates that iconoclasm was never solely an eighth-century phenomenon. If anything, the issue formally approved in 692 was an anticipation of the later, more impassioned quarrel.

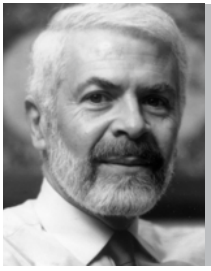
Given Islam's hesitant approach to portraiture, did Islamic theology or faith have significant relevance to the Council in Trullo or the later question of iconoclasm itself? The claim that it did has not vanished entirely from the secondary literature. Yet on purely historical grounds, the premise is largely speculation. The synodal debate of the 690s preceded the influence of the new religion on the Byzantine Church, as the issue was not a new one. The conciliar resolution was endorsed within Orthodoxy's own backyard; the young monotheistic faith and culture of Islam was not directly involved. Christian opposition to images, quite simply, was not in its origin a reaction to Islam. The same could be argued (rightly) about the political anti-image strategy later adopted by the emperors, even if they were often derided as "Saracen-minded" by contemporaries.

Finally, the contemporaneous theological defenses of images should not be minimized with the usual faint praise. While the detractors of images were plentiful during the long iconoclastic age, as theologians, few were really gifted. On the other hand, iconodules such as Theodore of Studios, John of Damascus, and Patriarchs Germanos and Nikephoros mounted sophisticated apologies for images that were rich in their depth and detail. At its most fundamental level, their main contention was that if the Word of God assumed human nature and entered history as a historic, visible human being, then he was by definition able to receive an artistic depiction. The theological function of the icon is to be a permanent witness to and affirmation of the reality of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God. Christian iconography is a possibility because it is founded on God's manifestation in the flesh—on God's

self-disclosure. In Vladimir Lossky's apt formulation, it is the Incarnational mystery that justifies Christ's visible representation in paint. In Byzantine Christianity, art became inseparable from christology.

During a visit to Russia, Henri Matisse once mentioned that Orthodox icons were "really great art," and were for him even closer and more dear than Fra Angelico. "It is from them," he perceptively emphasized, "that we ought to learn how to understand art." Orthodox theologians would surely agree, though they might also insist that a holy image is more than a work of art or a mere teaching aid. Its deepest meaning—that which defines it—lies elsewhere. Ultimately it is all about the primacy of the Incarnation and Chalcedonian orthodoxy, on which it is firmly based. The theological component of the question of images should not be minimized, and he skeptical approach with which it has at times been scrutinized is unjustified. As any impartial assessment of the evidence demonstrates, the final liquidation of iconoclasm was primarily a theological victory rather than a political one. The theological battle was won by the Church and its monasteries, not by the state.

The above provides a suitable summary note on which to give the final word to John Meyendorff. He once suggested that the most important of the historical consequences of the Arab conquest of the Middle East was that it kept Byzantine Christianity on the defensive for centuries. By the end of the Middle Ages, he insisted, "Islam obliged Christians to live in a tiny enclosed world, which necessarily focused on the liturgical cult, and made them feel that it was normal. The Byzantine instinct for conservatism, which is both the main force and the principal weakness of Eastern Christianity, became the last refuge which could ensure its survival in the face of Islam." By any account, an important communal objective of Islam in its early years was to promote God's purpose by conquest, an inflexibly provocative stand that naturally brought it into incessant conflict with the Byzantine polity. But Orthodoxy's confrontation with its Islamic rival was simultaneously theological and military. At the core of Islamic theology was the claim that it was the latest, highest, and purest revelation of God. To say that this constituted a rejection of basic elements of Christian faith, including image veneration and Trinitarian theology, would be redundant. According to Muslim theology, God was not only invisible but was also completely unitary, having no partners whatsoever. If we are to place this survey in its true perspective, although Islam and Orthodoxy—universalistic world religions both—first met on the battlefield, distinct theological postulates were crucial to the organization and definition of both societies. ✠



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