

Iconoclasm, image and idolatry

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A foretaste of Heaven?

CHURCH BUILDINGS ARE SET APART; they are unlike other buildings in that they are constructed to glorify God. They also provide a tangible witness to the communities who have worshipped in them throughout the ages and who continue to use them regularly to this day. As such they are places hallowed by prayer, sites which mediate the spiritual and lift hearts to heaven. Stained-glass windows, statues, icons, banners, crucifixes are all things people associate with church interiors. The images portrayed by these artefacts can play an important part in defining churches as places of spiritual encounter. For some they provide a focus for meditation and reflection. Others find them helpful in creating a general atmosphere which is conducive to worship. The use of images in Christian churches provides a sharp contrast to the situation found in Jewish synagogues where the use of pictorial images is prohibited. This contrast between churches and synagogues might imply that all Christians find pictorial images helpful in their spiritual life, while all Jews do not. The true situation, however, is more complex.

For example, in the history of Christianity, flat representations have usually been judged to be less problematical than free-standing statues, since the latter so closely resemble pagan idols and – some would argue – are more inclined than paintings or mosaics to mislead the devotee into believing that the image possesses spiritual power in its own right. The Eastern Orthodox churches use only flat representations in the construction of icons. Yet in so far as the Western church in the high Middle Ages had an official teaching on the subject, this teaching held that although representative art could be employed for the decoration of churches and to commemorate the lives of the saints, images should not be used for veneration. Disputes about the use of images have occurred throughout the Church's history but the fiercest debates took place in the eighth and ninth centuries in the period which has come to be known as the Iconoclasm (726–843). It was during this period that the greatest contribution was made to the theology of the use of images within Christian devotion.

Earlier history

In the patristic era, Christians did not dispute that God sanctified particular material objects in special ways: Christ was present in the eucharist, and saints' relics were objects of deep reverence. Likewise, the cross, the instrument by which God redeemed the world, could be copied for veneration in churches. What was at issue in the iconoclastic dispute was the making of images of Christ and the saints and the use that was made of those images.

There seems to have been no Christian pictorial art, either at Rome or elsewhere, before the second half of the second century. When this art began to develop, most notably in the catacombs, there may still have been a reluctance to portray the person of Christ. Irenaeus records that a heretical group, followers of Carpocrates, had images of Christ which they venerated,¹ and Tertullian records the Christian use of drinking cups on which was depicted an image of the 'good shepherd' with a sheep on his shoulders. It is possible that a major stimulus for the development of Christian art was provided by the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity. This event took place following the battle of Milvian Bridge in the year 312 and brought an end to the Roman persecution of Christians. There is evidence that the use of images in churches was already controversial at this time,² but the subsequent destruction of images by iconoclasts makes it difficult to assess the extent to which pictorial images were used to adorn churches or the part that they played in corporate worship or private devotion. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340) is one of the first Christians whose attitude to the use of images can be directly ascertained. His view is expressed in a letter he wrote to the emperor's sister Constantia in reply to her request for an image of Christ.

How can one paint an image of so wondrous and unattainable a form – if the term form is at all applicable to the divine and spiritual essence – unless, like the unbelieving pagans, one is to represent things that bear no possible resemblance to anything . . . ? For they, too, make such idols when they wish to mould the likeness of what they consider to be a god or, as they might say, one of the heroes or anything else of the kind, yet are unable to approach a resemblance, and so delineate and represent some strange human shapes. Surely, even you will agree that such practices are not lawful for us.³

Eusebius argues that it is not possible to use pictorial imagery to depict spiritual things and that to use it in such a way is nothing short of idolatry, the same idolatry as that practised by the pagans.

The justification for images

It is fear of idolatry which has fuelled most of the arguments against the use of images in Christian spirituality. Two texts from Scripture are commonly quoted by those arguing against the use of images:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. (Exod 20:4–5a)

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (Jn 4:24)

However, appeal to Scripture was also made by those who wished to defend the use of images. One of the first to make a systematic attempt to formulate a Christian theory of images was Leontius, Bishop of Neapolis in Cyprus (c. 610–640). His writings, which take the form of a dialogue with a Jewish critic, were cited in defence of religious art at the second Nicene Council in 787. Jewish critics fixed upon the image cult as ammunition in their charges against Christian idolatry. Leontius' writings were designed to meet this challenge and he argues against the Jews on their own terms. The bulk of the text of his writings presents Old Testament examples of veneration of holy persons and objects by important religious leaders of old. The same God who prohibited the making of graven images in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:4) also commanded Moses to make cherubim for the Tabernacle (Exod 25:18–28). Leontius argues that Christian images are not to be worshipped for themselves but honoured as a reminder of God's intervention. 'We do not venerate the nature of wood, but through wood we embrace and venerate him who was crucified upon the wood of the Cross.'⁴ For Leontius the image was not to be considered as an idol but a symbol and a point of spiritual encounter with the divine. He also claimed that all creation can serve as a medium for the worship of God. In his writings we see one of the earliest articulations of the idea that material objects can mediate spiritual truth.

John of Damascus (c. 675–749) also took up the defence of images, writing in the late seventh and early eighth century. He also referred to

Scripture to show that material things were venerated by those of old. He writes:

It has been sufficiently demonstrated that the tent, the veil, the ark, the altar, and everything within the tent, were images and types, the works of men's hands, and that they were venerated by all Israel, and that the carved cherubim were also made by God's command.⁵

I have proven to you that under the old covenant God commanded images to be made: first the Tabernacle, and then everything in it.⁶

John of Damascus also uses the incarnation to argue that it is possible to make images of Christ.

In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see.

If we attempted to make an image of the invisible God, this would be sinful indeed. It is impossible to portray one who is without body: invisible, uncircumscribed and without form. Again, if we made images of men and believed them to be gods and adored them as if they were so, we would be truly impious. We do neither of these things. But we are not mistaken if we make the image of God incarnate, who was seen on earth in the flesh . . .

Thus John uses the incarnation as justification for making images indeed, and much of the iconoclastic dispute came to focus on Christology.⁷ The defenders of icons held that since the Word of God had really been incarnate in a man, and since it was possible to depict a human being, the refusal to make images of Christ was implicitly a denial of his real humanity. They charged the iconoclasts with thinking like Jews and Saracens. The iconoclasts, on the other hand, held that there is no possible representation of the Deity, and to behave as though an image had power to convey God's presence was idolatrous. They charged the users of icons with acting like pagans.

In the end, the iconoclasts were defeated. The rulings of the Second Council of Nicaea were accepted in the Eastern Church, where it is held that the images of Christ and the saints give special access to the images' prototypes, so that people are encouraged to pray before an icon and to honour it by the lighting of a candle.

The Western Church's response, on the other hand, denied that images had power of this kind, and held that they could be used for

instruction and decoration but not for veneration. Subsequently, of course, Western Christians used them in precisely that way. By entering the material world, Christ sanctified matter and enabled material objects to mediate and convey spiritual truth. It is this idea which forms the basis of the use of images in Christian spirituality.

The proper use of images

Although images can help to enhance Christian worship and aid spiritual reflection they can clearly be misused. The question as to what constitutes the proper use of images has led to bitter conflicts at various stages in the history of the Church. Consider, for example, a miracle attributed to an image of Sts Cosmas and Damian.

The woman developed a bad case of cholic and happened to be left alone in her house. Perceiving herself to be in danger, she crawled out of bed and, upon reaching the place where these most wise saints were depicted on the wall, she stood up, leaning upon her faith as upon a stick, and scraped off with her fingernails some plaster. This she put into water and, after drinking the mixture, she was immediately cured of her pains by the visitations of the saints.⁸

For those who believe that a saint's holiness is conveyed to the fabric of his or her representation, such an action is quite rational; but the relationship between the image and that which it represents is precisely the point at issue.

The difficulties created by the veneration of images led many Christians to reject them again at the Reformation, and the Council of Trent in turn imposed restrictions on the types of representation that could be used in Catholic worship. Those Christians who allow the use of images still have to draw a distinction between what constitutes proper and improper use of them.

Many of the problems associated with the improper use of images arise from a confusion between the image and its prototype. The worship offered to God must be different from that offered to images; it is when the two become confused that the use of images becomes idolatrous.

John of Damascus makes a clear distinction in his writings between absolute worship *latreia* (adoration) and relative worship *proskunesis* (veneration). 'Absolute worship is adoration which we give to God alone. Only he by nature deserves to be worshipped.'⁹ Relative worship

is the veneration of created things, be they images, holy places, the saints or sacred vessels.

Another important issue in relation to the use of images in Christian spirituality is that of the relationship between the image and its prototype. There are many reported cases of miracles being attributed to images and consequently these images become the focus of particular veneration. Also lights are often burnt before images and incense offered before them. One of the most important thinkers to reflect upon the relationship between the image and its prototype was Theodore of Studium (759–826). He spent much of his life as a monk at the monastery of Studios near Constantinople. For Theodore the image belonged to the Aristotelian category of relative things and so directs the attention from itself to its prototype. He quotes St Basil, one of the early church fathers, to justify his position.

He (St Basil) says, ‘The image of the emperor is also called “emperor” yet there are not two emperors, nor is his power divided, nor his glory fragmented. Just as the power and authority which rules over us is one, so also the glorification which we offer is one, and not many. Therefore the honour given to the image passes over to the prototype.’ What argument can deny that this example may be appropriately applied to Christ’s Icon?¹⁰

Implications for the use of images today

The fierce debates which took place during the period of iconoclasm focused primarily on the issue of idolatry. It is only God whom we should worship and not images. This must apply as much today as it has throughout the history of the Church.

There is always the danger that the use of images in Christian spirituality will be abused and things which begin as aids to prayer and spiritual growth will become idols which get in the way. However, those who defended the use of images amidst the bitter disputes of the Iconoclasm put forward coherent arguments justifying their use as spiritual aids. Through the Incarnation God sanctified matter and opened the way for material objects to convey spiritual truths. More than this, the image of a saint brings the devotee closer to the image’s prototype, and hence to the sanctity of the man or woman portrayed. Although Christians are called to worship in spirit and in truth they also form a part of the material world. Human beings gain insights and information about the world via the five senses. By being born into the material world as a human being, God through Jesus Christ opened the

way for material objects to convey spiritual truths as long as they are used appropriately. The important thing for those who use images as aids to spiritual growth is that they have a proper understanding of the relationship between the image and its prototype. The two must not become confused. To worship an image in the same way that one worships God is to succumb to idolatry. However, to venerate an image and use it as an aid to prayer and meditation can help Christian people to gain spiritual insights. It is clear that, throughout the history of the Church, images used in a proper way have helped Christian people to grow in faith. This is because images have provided points of encounter between the material world and the spiritual. They have given the faithful nothing less than glimpses of the divine.

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NOTES

1 Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the heresies* vol 1, bk 1, 25:6; Ancient Christian Writers series 55, trans D. J. Unger, revised J. J. Dillon (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), p 90.

2 J. Stevenson writes: 'That paintings might be placed in churches, even in distant provinces of the West, is clear from canon 37 of the Council of Elvira in Spain, held in the early fourth century, whatever the precise meaning of the wording of the canon may be: "There shall be no pictures in church, lest what is revered and adored be depicted on the walls." But these early church buildings have perished. The destruction of such buildings was one of the methods employed in the great persecution of 303–11, and this may account, in no small measure, for their disappearance' (*The catacombs: rediscovered monuments of early Christianity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), pp 55).

3 Eusebius, 'Letter to Constantia' in C. Mango, *The art of the Byzantine empire 312–1453* (New Jersey, 1972), p 17.

4 Leontius of Neapolis in N. Gendle, 'Leontius of Neapolis: a seventh-century defender of holy images' (unpublished), p 2.

5 John of Damascus in David Anderson (trans), *St John of Damascus on the divine images* (New York, 1980), p 66.

6 *Ibid.*, p 71.

7 A full account of the dispute is given in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian tradition: a history of the development of doctrine. 2: The spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp 91–133. See also Ambrosios Giakalis, *Images of the divine: the theology of icons at the seventh Ecumenical Council* (Leiden: E. J. Brill,

1994), pp 93–113; and Jaroslav Pelikan, *Imago Dei: the Byzantine apologia for icons* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp 67–98.

8 *Miracula SS. Cosmae et Damiani* – Miracle 15 in Mango, *The art of the Byzantine empire 312–1453*.

9 John of Damascus in David Anderson (trans), *St John of Damascus on the divine images*, p 82.

10 Theodore of Studium quoting St Basil in Catharine P. Roth (trans), *St Theodore the Studite on the holy icons* (New York, 1982), p 57.