Iconoclasm, East and West

Catherine Brown Tkacz

Two great and lasting Iconoclasms have occurred in the Christian Era, one in the East and the other in the West. When the Muslims conquered Constantinople in 1453 they plastered over the Christian images in Hagia Sophia; a few decades later the Protestant iconoclasts in Western Europe smashed Catholic images in Switzerland, England, France, the Lowlands, Germany. The cultural context of each iconoclasm was different, and so were the outcomes. For today, in the East (that is, among the Orthodox and among Catholics of the Byzantine Rite) the full array of images is still in use, a vivid aid and enhancement to worship. In the West, however, perhaps especially in the United States, it is now the Catholics themselves who have stripped their altars and whitewashed the frescoes on the church walls.

To understand the different results of the Iconoclasms in East and West, it is necessary to acknowledge the nature of religious art. Religious art and architecture is theology made visible. That is, it is the visible expression of how man understands God. And, especially when one speaks of religious architecture and the art within a church, theology includes anthropology, that is, how man understands his relation to God. For Catholics, the defining elements of the Faith that inform art and architecture that is distinctively Catholic are the Incarnation and the sacraments. Belief in one, creator God is common to Jews, Muslims, and Christians; but belief in Jesus as the Christ, as God Incarnate, is specific to Christians. And belief in the Incarnation radically affects art.

Before the historical life of Jesus on earth, the one transcendent God was not available to human sight directly, and so could not be depicted. To the contrary, the Ten Commandments prohibited worshiping graven images (Exodus 20:1–6). As religious art, the golden calf was bad theology: the Israelites still thought that God, the one Creator God who had delivered them, could be pleased and appeased by the gift of a shiny statue. Art so wrong-headed is blasphemous, and Moses rightly destroyed it. In contrast, the rightful use in worship of the arts, including metalwork, woodworking, textiles, precious stones, and rudimentary architecture, was then given to the Israelites in detail in the directions for constructing and adorning the tabernacle, ark, candlesticks, altar, and court for worship and the priestly vestments (Exod. 25–28).

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Then God became incarnate. He looked on his people with human eyes, touched and healed them with human hands. Astoundingly, it was now possible to see God and therefore to depict him. Indeed, it became desirable to make images of him, to commemorate his saving actions and to represent him whom we are called to love. For the first time, religious art could rightly and reverently depict God, precisely because he had become incarnate. The prohibition of Exodus refers specifically to idolatrous images, and images of God Incarnate are licit. Moreover, they are even sacramental: blessed mediations of the presence of God[1].

Just as the Incarnation transformed religious art, so the actions of Jesus led to a transformation of the structure of the space for worship that had been outlined in Exodus and solidly expressed in the Temple in Jerusalem. The old sanctuary had held the sacrifice of atonement behind the veil. Jesus Christ, however, had superseded that sacrifice by his own perfect sacrifice on the Cross. In bloodless mystery, starting at the Last Supper he also had made it physically available to the faithful, and his new order of priests continues to make it available to believers by the consecration effected in the new sanctuary, with the veil opened.[2] What occurs now in the sanctuary is far holier than the sacrifice of the Old Law. Therefore, the sanctuary remained prominent in Christian churches, and was even slightly raised so that the faithful could see into it. The Temple's wall between sanctuary and congregation became an iconostasis, a wall of images, proclaiming the faith visibly. The Royal Doors in the center of the iconostasis are opened during the sacrifice of the Divine Liturgy, and through them the priest brings the Eucharist to the faithful. The images flanking the Royal Doors point to the two natures of Christ: the true humanity of Christ is recalled to the faithful by the icon to the left of the Royal Doors, the Theotokos, the "Godbearer," holding her infant son; the true Divinity of Jesus is recalled in the icon to the right of the Royal Doors, the icon of Christ Pantocrator, Christ the Ruler of All. Whereas the priest of the Old Law performed the sacrifice in isolation from the people, the new priest, who in sacrament is imitating Christ, is visible to the people through the opened Royal Doors and then, let us note with awe, he brings the perfect and perfecting sacrifice directly out to the people.

For the perfect sacrifice perfects. The purpose of the Incarnation was to redeem and sanctify God's people, and the Eucharist is the sacrifice that sanctifies and makes holy. God's relationship to man was also transformed by Jesus Christ. God, who had made man, male and female, in his own image, had now become incarnate and had

[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Cittá del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), §§1159–62 on icons, §§1667–1679 on sacramentals.

[2] See also Heb. 9:1–12.

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himself taken on man's image. As the Fourth Ecumenical Council asserted at Chalcedon in 451, our Lord Jesus Christ is "consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and *consubstantial with us as to his humanity*; 'like us in all things but sin.'"[3] Mary, the sinless new Eve, and Jesus Christ, the sinless new Adam, embody the holiness each of us is to aspire to. Mary, being entirely human, exemplifies in a particularly congenial way the human image of God brought to perfection through grace. The human aspiration to holiness can be realized through God's transforming grace, particularly as it is bestowed through the sacraments.[4] St. Peter taught that Christ has made it possible for us to become "partakers of the divine nature."[5] This teaching continues through the centuries, in both East and West. As Athanasius, archbishop of Alexandria, taught in the fourth century, "God became man in order that man might become God."[6] St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century concurs: "The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods."[7] By instituting the Eucharist, Jesus Christ created a means to nourish and sanctify the individual human person. Basic to the Catholic faith is belief that God's grace is real, a true means by which he wills to renew and restore his living image within each of the faithful. This enables each individual layman to be "a sign of the living God" and to realize the universal vocation to holiness.[8]

Abundant, beautiful decoration covered the interior surfaces of the early Christian churches and of the medieval and Byzantine churches. Extensive, often brightly colored programs of art depicted the events of salvation history from creation on, including typological depictions to show how God had prepared throughout history for his Incarnation, and often individual saints were commemorated, giving the faithful rich material for meditation and the salutary reminder that we, here and now, are in the company of the communion of Saints. Within the decoration of the churches are expressed basic Christian beliefs, overlooked today by many who cast an eye on the

[3] Council of Chalcedon (451): DS 301, see also Heb. 4:15; *Catechism*, §467, italics added. The scripture quoted is Heb. 2:16–18. See also C. B. Tkacz, "Reproductive Science and the Incarnation," *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* 25.5 (Fall, 2002), pp. 11–25, at p. 15.

[4] In Eastern theology, this process is called theosis, or deification.

[5] 2 Pet. 1:4, quoted in *Catechism*, §460. See also Tkacz, "Reproductive Science and the Incarnation," p. 13.

[6] *Oratio de incarnatione Verbi* 54.3, ed. Charles Kannengiesser, Sources Chrétiennes, 199 (Paris, 1973), 458. Byzantine theologians who emphasize the role of the Eucharist in theosis include John of Damascus and Maximus the Confessor. See "Theosis," *ODB* 3:2069–70; and Eric D. Perl, "'. . . That Man Might Become God': Central Themes in Byzantine Theology," 39–57 in *Heaven and Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium* (University Park, Penn., 1998).

[7] Ibid., quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opuscula* 57:1–4.

[8] *Lumen Gentium* 4.38, and chapter 5.

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early Church: the spiritual equality of the sexes, which leads to the balanced representation of the sexes and to the depiction of women as types of Christ, just as men are, as a sign of the equal capacity of each sex to become holy. [9] The goodness of Creation itself was celebrated; for instance, plants and animals and fish and birds in naturalistic detail filled floor mosaics in countless early churches.[10] To the harmonious lines of classical architecture, Christians added decorations symbolic, historical, typological, and geometrical, so that the very space of the place of worship was a heavenly sight.[11] Monumental icons in jewel-toned mosaic covered much of the interior of Hagia Sophia ("Holy Wisdom") in Constantinople, often called the Great Church, constructed and decorated in 532–37, while Justinian was emperor. On the tenth-century Church of the Holy Cross at Aght'amar in Armenia the decoration was innovatively extended from the interior to adorn the entire exterior of the church as well, as somewhat later becomes the practice on the cathedrals of Western Europe.[12]

Catholic art and architecture are the visible expression of Catholic theology, and therefore they ought to express the faith that Jesus is truly God Incarnate, that the Sacraments are real bestowals of grace, and that the human person is truly able, through grace, to become a restored, sanctified, living image of God. Anything less is theologically insufficient.[13]

At the same time, because Catholic art and architecture express Catholic theology, those who espouse different creeds can consider the Catholic expressions blasphemous. It is no accident that in the intellectual climate in which Islam was formed, the first Iconoclasm also occurred. Influenced by bishops in Asia Minor, the iconoclast Emperor Leo III in 726 ordered the destruction of icons of Christ, church decoration, and altar furnishings.[14] The theological issue was whether the Ten Commandments' prohibition against idolatry forbade the use of icons in worship. The Syrian theologian St. John of Damascus (d. 749) defended

[9] See C. B. Tkacz, "Jesus and the Spiritual Equality of Women," *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* 24.4 (Fall 2001) 24–29; and idem, "Singing Women's Words as Sacramental Mimesis," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales* 70 (2003) 43–96.

[10] Henry Maguire, *Earth and Ocean: The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art* = Monographs on the Fine Arts, 43 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press for the College Art Association, 1987).

[11] For such visual profusion in the chancel, vault, and arches of S. Apollinare in Classe in Ravenna, see Maguire, Fig. 89.

[12] Sirarpie der Nersessian, *Aght'amar, Church of the Holy Cross* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965).

[13] *Pace* Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), who insists that the Catholic imagination is not distinct from other religious imaginations (p. 18). His definition of sacrament is sloppy: it is "physical and within it is God's love." As a result, he can agree with Andre Dubus that a sandwich can be a sacrament (p. 2).

[14] *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (hereafter *ODB*), 3 vols., ed. Alexander P. Kazhdan (Oxford, 1991), s.v. "Iconoclasm."

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icon-worship, for which he was anathematized as a supporter of Saracens. His eloquent defense of icons has pertinence through the centuries, so it is valuable here to rehearse several of his arguments.

St. John of Damascus teaches the direct relationship between the Incarnation and sacramental grace that is being argued in the essay as distinctive to Catholic theology and therefore has been distinctively expressed in Catholic art and architecture. Significantly, St. John includes in his discussion of icons the affirmation of man as "imitation" (*mimesis*) of God.[15] He also clarified that the believer does not worship the trivial materials of wood and paint from which the icon is made, but rather worships God himself through the icon. John affirms: "I do not adore the creation rather than the Creator, but I adore the one who became a creature, who was formed as I was, who clothed Himself in creation without weakening or departing from His divinity, that he might raise our nature in glory and make us partakers of His divine nature."[16]

The prohibition against graven images the Damascene treats at length, concluding, "It is obvious that when you contemplate God becoming man, then you may depict Him clothed in human form.... Depict His wonderful condescension, His birth from the Virgin, His baptism in the Jordan, His transfiguration on Tabor, His sufferings which have freed us from passion, since through divine power He worked them in the flesh. Show his saving cross, the tomb, the resurrection, the ascension into the heavens. Use every kind of drawing, word, or color."[17] He continues that the saints are also to be remembered: "I bow before the images of Christ, the incarnate God; of our Lady, the Theotokos and Mother of the Son of God; and of the saints, who are God's friends. In struggling against evil they have shed their blood; they have imitated Christ who shed His blood for them by shedding their blood for Him."[18] St. Basil, John recalls, teaches that "the honor given to the image is transferred to its prototype."[19]

But the suppression of icons continued, from political motives as well as mistaken religious scruples. Emperor Constantine V condemned icon veneration as diabolic idolatry and rejected the veneration of relics as well.[20] The first iconophile ("icon-loving") martyrs were killed in 760, most of them monks. In the Church of Blachernai icons were replaced with mosaics of trees, birds, and animals. Hagia Sophia was stripped of icons in 768/9 by the iconoclast ("icon-breaking") Patriarch Niketas of Constantinople. The Iconoclasts accepted as holy only the Eucharist, the church building, and the sign of the cross made by a priest.

[15] *ODB*, s.v. "John of Damascus."
[16] St. John of Damascus, *On Divine Images*, par. 4.
[17] St. John of Damascus, par. 5–8, quotation from par. 8.
[18] St. John of Damascus, par. 19.
[19] St. Basil, *Letters on the Holy Spirit*, 18.
[20] *ODB*, s.v. "Iconoclasm."

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The Church, however, upheld the doctrine of St. Basil and of St. John of Damascus. The Second Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787 condemned Iconoclasm. Decades later, on March 11, 843, Hagia Sophia was recovered from the Iconoclasts and the icons restored. The event is celebrated in the Byzantine Rite of the Catholic Church and among the Orthodox as the Triumph of Orthodoxy, commemorated on the First Sunday of Lent. Note well: the feast commemorates the whole of orthodox faith, triumphing through the vindication of its visual expression in icons.

Muslims, on the other hand, did not believe that Jesus was Christ and so they maintained the Mosaic Law's prohibition of images. When they conquered Constantinople in 1453, the Muslims plastered over the icons in Hagia Sophia. In some areas they painted geometrical designs on top of the plaster, for they accepted geometrical decoration as licit. They made the church into a mosque, Aya Sofia Camii. Their belief, their extension of the Ten Commandments' prohibition of idol worship, was that no figural representation was decent within a mosque.[21]

But what of the Iconoclasm in the West, not by Muslims, but by Christians? For Western Europe has suffered extensive destruction of religious art at the hands of Christians. After sporadic episodes in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, Western iconoclasm became dominant in the early sixteenth century, violently. Iconoclastic destruction continued through the centuries, at the hands of "seventeenth- and eighteenth-century anti-royalists in England [and] France."[22] The anti-Catholic French Revolution brought "tremendous losses" when the abbey churches were secularized, and Napoleon's campaigns in Germany and Spain were similarly destructive. But the blitzkrieg[23] beginnings of wholesale, enduring Western iconoclasm are in the sixteenth century.

In 1524 the iconoclasts of Zurich were the first to "cleanse" the churches by destroying the images, and by 1535 the destruction of images was "commonplace" in Switzerland. There, under the

[21] For the modern restoration of some mosaics, see Natalia B. Teteriatnikov, *The Mosaics of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul: The Fossati Restoration and the Work of the Byzantine Institute* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998).

[22] The earlier iconoclastic acts were by "twelfth-century Cistercians, thirteenth-century Templars, fourteenth-century Lollards and Hussites"; Madeline H. Caviness, *Stained Glass Windows*, Typologie des Sources du Moyen Âge Occidental, 76 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), pp. 62–69. The details in this paragraph are from her account. On Iconoclasm in England, see also Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts, Volume I: Laws Against Images* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

[23] In less than two weeks, August 10–24, 1566, Iconoclasts swept through nearly all seventeen provinces of the Netherlands, and devastation in each city and country side was often complete. At Antwerp, for instance, the interiors of thirty churches were destroyed in two days; Phyllis Mack Crew, *Calvinist Preaching and Iconoclasm in The Netherlands 1544–1569* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 10–12. The "cleansing" in Switzerland was similarly swift.

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influence of Ulrich Zwingli, "iconoclasm became a consistent policy, an established pattern of 'Protestantization' of cities."[24]

In England soldiers smashed their halberds through church windows, so that more than ninety percent of English stained glass was destroyed by order of Henry VIII and Oliver Cromwell. Obliteration of imagery was often ruthlessly complete: "walls [were] beaten down, stained glass smashed, carved pews pulled up, even decorated stone work broken; while brass and iron were extracted from graves and windows, vestments and service books were thrown upon a bonfire in the public square."[25] Liturgical vessels were confiscated. Catholic religious art was systematically inventoried, which proved to be the first step in its confiscation.[26]

The riots of 1566 in the Lowlands wrought similar destruction. Only five-to-nine percent (!) of the stained glass survived there. Frescoes were whitewashed. Sculptures in stone and wood were broken or burned. Libraries were knee-deep in ripped up pages torn from manuscripts. Hermit cells were broken into and despoiled. Even wayside shrines were destroyed.[27] In many cities all the vestments, many bright with embroidered depictions of Christ and of prefigurations of him, were burned.[28]

Iconoclasm by Christians occurs when the faithful lose faith, that is, when the clergy and the people no longer believe that God intends to sanctify anyone. When grace is gone from one's sense of reality, the imagination itself seems dangerous, not a human aspect that God can use for the good, but merely a tool the Devil can use for human destruction. Better, then (it seems), to destroy the products of imagination, than to risk damnation.[29] Further, the biblical plays that had been a staple of public Catholic life for centuries next came under attack, and thus a traditional and significant means of teaching biblical history and Church doctrine was suppressed.[30]

Eyewitness testimony which a lay woman in Belgium reports on the riots in her letter to a friend in another city is highly significant. The woman describes how the rioters were destroying every kind of

[24] Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 106–07.

[25] John Phillips, *The Reformation of Images: Destruction of Art in England, 1535–1660* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 1, describing the ravaging of the episcopal chapel in Norwich in 1647.

[26] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[27] Jeremy Dupertuis Bangs, *Church Art and Architecture in the Low Countries before 1566* (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1997), passim.

[28] Bangs, *Church Art and Architecture*, p. 155.

[29] Philips, *Destruction of Art in England*, p. xii, speaking particularly of "the Lollard argument (later to be the Puritan one)."

[30] Michael O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early-Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 11. O'Connell also relates the Western Iconoclasm to that of the eighth century in the East.

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image, but not, she asserts, "our most important image of Christ, our priest."[31] This member of the laity– not a religious, not a cleric– knew her theology familiarly enough to know that people are images of God and that priests are so in a particular way. This indicates that the effect of worshiping in a church decorated with images that reinforced and even taught Catholic theology was in fact for the laity to be informed about their faith, and to understand the role of art in enhancing worship.

That Iconoclasm is a result of loss of faith is seen most painfully in Iconoclastic desecration of the host. Overturning the tabernacle containing the consecrated host was the mildest form of insult: in the sixteenth century rioting iconclasts sometimes consumed the consecrated hosts "as if they were common bread" or fed the blessed sacrament to animals.[32] Sister Jeanne, a nun of the convent of St. Claire in Geneva, chronicled the iconoclasm in that city in October 1530, describing how the rioters pillaged and tore down "all the churches, monasteries, and convents, *breaking all the tabernacles, stepping on the hosts*, throwing them into filth,... even to the extent of feeding the sacred host to a goat and saying, 'Now he can die if he wants, he has received the sacrament.' "[33] Elsewhere, during mass a young bourgeois grabbed the Host from the priest, crying that it was merely bread and that their worship was idolatry.[34] In St. Médard's church in Paris in 1561, a baker who sought to protect the tabernacle from Protestants, pleaded, "Messieurs, do not touch it for the honor of Him who dwells here." The iconoclasts retorted, "Does your god of paste protect you now from the pains of death?" and then killed him.[35] Sometimes apostate priests fomented the destruction: An apostate priest near Maastricht ridiculed the consecrated host as "the baked God" and scoffed "that our Lord should enter into bread," and similarly a priest in Culembourg roasted a Host, saying, "You see that the God of bread, about which you've heard so much preached, is neither flesh nor blood, he is... nothing."[36]

When faith in sanctifying grace is lost to the extent that one doubts the reality of the sacraments, then the iconoclastic destruction of images and altars leads to a new prominence for the preacher: the pulpit supplants the altar.[37] Today this situation is conventional in many generic Christian houses of worship, where the area that the

[31] Bangs, *Church Art and Architecture*.

[32] Eire, *War Against the Idols*, pp. 113, 121, 128, 138, 146, on desecration in Switzerland.

[33] Eire, *War Against the Idols*, pp. 126, 128, quoting Jeanne de Jussie, *Le levain du Calvinisme*; italics mine.

[34] Crew, *Iconoclasm in The Netherlands*, p. 10.

[35] Crew, *Iconoclasm in The Netherlands*, p. 26.

[36] Crew, *Iconoclasm in The Netherlands*, pp. 5–6, 26, n. 86

[37] Phillips, *The Reformation of Images*, p. 81, writing of England in the sixteenth century.

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people face is even sometimes called "the stage." If music and reading of scripture and preaching comprise the whole of worship, there is no need for a sanctuary, indeed, it would be inappropriate to have one. Conversely, if the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is real, there had better be a sanctuary. A sanctuary is nothing less than an architectural manifestation of faith.

The Catholic imagination is informed by the Incarnation – by the fact of it, that God became man, and by the astounding purpose of it, that God intended thereby to make men holy. God's grace is not merely a legalistic willingness by God to overlook man's foulness; God's grace sanctifies, we are truly forgiven, and truly God offers us the grace sufficient to transform us into splendid and beloved images of himself. Focal in this understanding of grace are the sacraments, "the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ."[38] Not all Christians believe there are sacraments; Catholics do, and Catholic churches constitute the primary setting in which God gives grace to his people through the sacraments. Yet a mistaken ecumenism has in many parishes reduced Catholic preaching, catechesis, architecture, and art to a pan-Christian Least Common Denominator, with no overtly Catholic features.

The decoration of churches is always the visible expression of theology. It conveys what the worshipers in that building believe about God and about his relation to humankind. Though the images in a church may seem mere adornment, a small matter, St. John of Damascus knew better. He pointed out twelve centuries ago, "A small thing is not small when it leads to something great; and it is no small matter to forsake the ancient tradition of the Church which was upheld by all those who were called before us, whose conduct we should observe, and whose faith we should imitate."[39]

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[38] *Catechism*, §774.
[39] St. John of Damascus, *On Divine Images*, par. 1.

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