Smashing Idols: A Paradoxical Semiotics

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of monotheism within a polytheist culture is strictly connected with the institution of the dialectics between "monolatry" and "idolatry." On the one hand, one divinity among many becomes the center of an increasingly exclusive cult; on the other hand, this exclusivity unfolds in parallel with the stigmatization of any alternative veneration. The establishment of monolatry is substantiated both in sacred texts, which designate the only god, forbid all others, prescribe the legitimate cult, and condemn deviations, and in liturgy that avoids any reference to multiplicity of transcendence. The liturgical work of monolatry, however, is not only positive, since in addition to regulating the material, verbal, and actional signs of the cult, it also entails a destructive tension. Thus, in establishing monolatry, determining formulae for evoking the only transcendence is as essential as destroying any signs that might contaminate it by representing a rival divinity.

Ἀλλ'ἄνθρωποι πάλιν παράφρονες, καταλιγωρήσαντες καὶ οὕτως τῆς δοθείσης αὐτοῖς χάριτος, τοσοῦτον ἀπεστράφησαν τὸν Θεόν, καὶ τοσοῦτον ἐθόλωσαν ἑαυτῶν τὴν ψυχὴν ὡς μὴ μόνον ἐπιλαθέσθαι τῆς περὶ Θεοῦ ἐννοίας, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἕτερα ἀνθ'ἑτέρων ἑαυτοῖς ἀναπλάσασθαι.

—Athanasius Περὶ τῆς ἐνανθρωπήσεως τοῦ Λόγου, 11, 21–24

The evolution of monotheism within a polytheist culture is strictly connected with the institution of the dialectics between "monolatry"[1] and "idolatry" (Assmann 1998). On the one hand, a single divinity (among the others) becomes the center of an increasingly exclusive cult; on the other

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1. "Monolatry" is "a monotheism of cult, worship, and commitment" (Assmann 2008, 63).

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hand, this exclusivity unfolds in parallel with the stigmatization of any alternative veneration (Alvarez-Peryre and Eliacheff 2010). The establishment of monolatry is substantiated both in sacred texts, which designate the only god, forbid all others, prescribe the legitimate cult, and condemn deviations, and in liturgy, which carefully avoids any reference to multiplicity of transcendence. The liturgical practice of monolatry, however, is not only positive, since in addition to regulating the material, verbal, and actional signs of the cult, it also entails a destructive tension (Llenbogen and Tugendhaft 2011). Thus, in establishing monolatry, determining formulae for evoking a single transcendence is as central as destroying any signs that might contaminate it by representing a rival divinity.

Starting from this general conceptual framework, this essay collects, categorizes, and analyzes a series of heterogeneous materials, mostly stemming from Judaism and Christianity. It points out the tension between, on the one hand, the interdefinition of monolatry and idolatry in sacred texts and, on the other hand, the rhetorics through which liturgy emphasizes such interdefinition. Liturgy is understood broadly, as the series of interpretive habits and practices shared by a religious community. In Judaism, the liturgy of iconoclasm is mostly verbal: it consists in narratives where the idea of any agency of idols is ridiculed and stigmatized. Christianity features these narratives as well, but with a complication: they cannot limit themselves to distinguish between monolatry and idolatry. They must differentiate, instead, between legitimate simulacra of transcendence (starting from its embodiment par excellence, that is, incarnation) and illegitimate idols. The intrinsic paradoxical nature of this distinction is evident above all in hagiographic tales, wherein saints must appear as legitimate agents of transcendence destroying its idolatrous usurpers. The contradiction explodes in visual renditions of iconoclastic tales: here pictorial simulacra must be credible in depicting the destruction of other simulacra. Moreover, the visual tale of iconoclasm not only bestows an agency to idols but also provides them with an iconic embodiment.

Charles S. Peirce's famous tripartite semiotic categorization is invoked so as to make this paradox intelligible. Whereas Judaism and, later on, Protestantism strive for a uniquely symbolical relation between God and its manifestation (which ultimately results in a solely verbal presence of God), Christianity and, above all, Catholicism long for a both iconic and indexical embodiment of transcendence. Jesus must resemble a man but must also be the incarnation of God. That which is not purely symbolical, though, is always subject to accusations of idolatry. The infinite Christian controversies over images, relics,

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the Eucharist, and the real nature of Jesus in relation to God all stem from this semiotic paradox. Evoking, defining, and narrating idolatry is therefore a central task for all monolatries wishing to define themselves in relation to alternative semiotics of the sacred.

Sacred Texts

The Midrash and the Bible

Every monotheistic tradition mandates the destruction of forbidden signs, qualified as "idols" in relation to the monolatric discipline. Sacred texts and their interpretations, moreover, preserve the narrative memory of this liturgical purification. Thus, in Judaism, Exod. 20:4–6,[2] Lev. 19:4 and 26:1, and Deut. 5:7–10 all prohibit the fabrication and the devotional usage of any representations as an alternative figure to monolatric exclusivity (Dohmen 2012). At the same time, the Torah and the Midrash contain several apologues that sanction idolatry not only abstractly, through the interdiction of the Scriptures, but also through reference to the narrative topos of the smashed idol.[3]

Bereshit Rabba, also known as Genesis Rabba, is one of the volumes of Midrash Rabba, a series of ten collections of Aggadic Midrashim (nonlegislative teachings) on the five books of the Torah and on the five scrolls.[4] Chapter 38 contains an episode about the childhood of Abraham, related by R. Hiyya. The text designates Terah, Abraham's father, as a "manufacturer of idols." One day, while Terah is away from his workshop, he entrusts it to young Abraham. A woman enters to offer food to the idols. Abraham grabs a stick and smashes all the idols, except the biggest one, in whose hand he places the stick. Upon Terah's return, Abraham explains the disaster to his father in a derisive way: after receiving the food offering, the idols fought over who would eat first, and then the biggest one destroyed all the others with the stick.

This apologue was frequently commented on in Midrashic literature, in Christian exegesis, and in modern and contemporary hermeneutics. At its core lies the narrative rendering of the transition from the polytheistic cult of the father, the manufacturer of idols, to the monolatry of the son, the smasher of idols. The rationality of monotheism without simulacra is affirmed through

2. Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

3. It should be borne in mind, though, that in this context "idol" is a polemical term, not a simple descriptive.

4. Beginning of the fifth and sixth centuries CE.

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derision of idolatry for (as contemporary pragmatics would put it) situating the source of agency in an absurd way,[5] by the idol and its stick.

The Bible contains many references to the removal, destruction, and annihilation of idols: 1 Kings 15:12 associates the removal of idols to the elimination of male cultic prostitution,[6] thus suggesting a relation between the univocal definition of the cultic figure (monolatry) and the parallel regulation of the sphere of affects and sexuality (unremunerated heterosexuality; Halbertal and Margalit 1994). Similarly, 2 Kings 23:24 relates the story of Josiah, who "put away the mediums and the wizards and the teraphim and the idols and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, that he might establish the words of the law which were written in the book that Hilki'ah the priest found in the house of the LORD." In all these passages, the Bible uses the word *gilluwl* (לּוּלִגּ),[7] which literally designates tree trunks, logs, or wooden blocks. The aim of such a designation is, once again, denigration, but it also underlines the inertia of idols and therefore the stupidity of those who would attribute to them any agency whatsoever. Often, a strongly negative designation further emphasizes the futility of idols: 2 Chron. 15:8, for instance, recounts that "when Asa heard these words, the prophecy of Azari'ah the son of Oded, he took courage, and put away the abominable idols from all the land of Judah and Benjamin and from the cities which he had taken in the hill country of E'phraim, and he repaired the altar of the LORD that was in front of the vestibule of the house of the LORD." In this case, the word for "idols" is *shiqquwts* (שִׁקּוּץ), which refers to "abominable idols."

In the Old Testament, idols are eliminated through various destructive acts that occur every time the uniqueness of transcendence is threatened. Thus, idols are "beaten into powder" (2 Chron. 34:7);[8] "pass away" (Isa. 2:18);[9] they are cast forth to the moles and to the bats (Isa. 2:20, 31:7);[10] they are "dismayed" (Jer. 50:2);[11] they entail the desolation of altars, the breaking of statues, the

5. On the notion of "agency," see Leone (2009).

6. "And he took away the sodomites out of the land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made."

7. Compare *khillul* 'profanation'; blasphemy and scandalous activities are "*khillul* of the Name." I thank Ugo Volli for this suggestion.

8. "He broke down the altars, and beat the Ashe'rim and the images into powder, and hewed down all the incense altars throughout all the land of Israel. Then he returned to Jerusalem."

9. "And the idols shall utterly pass away."

10. "In that day men will cast forth their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, to the moles and to the bats"; "for in that day every one shall cast away his idols of silver and his idols of gold, which your hands have sinfully made for you."

11. "Declare among the nations and proclaim, set up a banner and proclaim, conceal it not, and say: 'Babylon is taken, Bel is put to shame, Mer'odach is dismayed. Her images are put to shame, her idols are dismayed.'"

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death of worshippers (Ezek. 6:4);[12] they are "destroyed" (Ezek. 30:13);[13] "lay waste" (Mic. 1:7);[14] and their name itself is proscribed (Zech. 13:2).[15]

The New Testament and the New Testament Apocrypha

Conversely, and quite significantly, the New Testament never mentions the destruction of idols. The New Testament Apocrypha sometimes refer to it, but always with an ambiguous narrative twist. The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy (fifth to sixth centuries) recounts that, during the persecution by Herod, local idols announce the arrival of the infant Jesus in the cities of his peregrination. In Mesrin, an idol announces the imminent arrival of a great king. That happens again in the following city, where idols collapse, crushing all the worshippers. The child Jesus then resuscitates 182 people but lets the nine priests of Apollo die. The apologue is ambiguous: if idols themselves announce the arrival of Jesus and, in the second case, they self-destroy because of the superiority of the "great king," they demonstrate through these same acts that they are not inert but endowed with agency and intentionality.

The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew contains similar episodes. Here, upon the arrival of the Virgin Mary with the child, "all the idols prostrate themselves before Jesus, and they lay down with their face on the ground, completely ravaged and smashed, thus demonstrating that they were absolutely nothing" (23:1). Similarly, the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior, a translation into Arabic of a Greek original dating from the fourth to fifth centuries, reports that the Holy Family is about to arrive in a major city of Egypt, where there is a colossal idol, to which all the idols of the country pledge their vows and offerings. When the family is near the idol, all the citizens, priests, and princes of that land start to tremble terribly. When they interrogate the idol about the cause of such sudden agitation, the idol replies: "A hidden god came here, who is truly a god. There is no god worthy of divine cult except him, because he is truly the son of God. This land has realized it, and therefore it trembled and shook at his arrival" (10:3). Upon saying these words, the idol collapses, breaking in a

12. "Your altars shall become desolate, and your incense altars shall be broken; and I will cast down your slain before your idols."

13. "Thus says the Lord GOD: I will destroy the idols, and put an end to the images, in Memphis; there shall no longer be a prince in the land of Egypt; so I will put fear in the land of Egypt."

14. "All her images shall be beaten to pieces, all her hires shall be burned with fire, and all her idols I will lay waste; for from the hire of a harlot she gathered them, and to the hire of a harlot they shall return."

15. "And on that day, says the LORD of hosts, I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, so that they shall be remembered no more; and also I will remove from the land the prophets and the unclean spirit."

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thousand pieces, and all the people of Egypt and of the nearby regions rush to the city at the news.

These three tales typologically refer to Isa. 19:1 ("An oracle concerning Egypt"), "Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them," a passage explicitly quoted in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. The three aforementioned texts affirm the superiority of the "invisible god" over the visible idols, a recurrent Judeo-Christian topos. In each episode, nevertheless, idols are not presented like the "tree trunks" of the Old Testament, that is, like passive objects moved by external agency; on the contrary, the idols of the New Testament Apocrypha are subjects that announce, speak, reply, and pay homage to each other according to a hierarchy. Above all, they need no alien hand to be destroyed; they self-destroy. Here, the Midrashic episode and its irony toward the idols' capacity for action is taken seriously so as to extol the institution of Jesus as incarnated transcendence.

The difference between the passive destruction of idols in the Old Testament and the reflexive destruction (self-destruction) or even the active destruction (idols destroy each other) in the New Testament has been noticed and underlined by subsequent medieval commentators. For instance, in the Life of the Virgin Mary, the verses by Hrotsvita de Gandersheim (born ca. 930, fl. 973) particularly emphasize the episode of self-destruction of the idols, who are well aware of their inferiority in relation to "the great king": "iam cognoscentes, regem venisse perennem / atque deum verum magna virtute deorum" (Hrotsvita de Gandersheim 2000; Bisanti 2011).

How should one interpret this difference between Old and New Testaments, as well as the emphasis placed on it in the Christian tradition? Why are Abraham's idols nothing more than ridiculed, humiliated, and passively destroyed pieces of wood, while the idols destroyed by Jesus's arrival speak and act? The answer can be found in the different semiotic relations that Judaism, on the one hand, and Christianity, on the other hand, establish between transcendence and its representations. In Judaism, every representation of transcendence is idolatry and is therefore to be totally eliminated. Addressing transcendence through mediation of any simulacrum would entail a return to pre-Abrahamic polytheism. In principle, Christianity inherits the Jewish monotheist tension but articulates it in a paradoxical way by introducing the idea of transcendent "incarnation": a visible son, simultaneously human and divine, of the invisible divinity. Whereas Judaism must condemn and destroy without exception every

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"incarnation" of the divinity, Christianity must, on the contrary, distinguish between idolatrous embodiments and the veritable incarnation of Jesus. Hence, Christian texts stage not the denigration of wooden idols but the submission of "speaking" idols.

This paradoxical dialectic, moreover, runs across the entire history of Christianity. It manifests itself, first, in the Jews' mistrust toward the "new religion." Is it idolatry? The idea of incarnated transcendence cannot but appear suspect to Jewish scholars, especially in the first centuries of the common era, in the context of Jewish resistance to Roman idols and emperor worship (Kogman-Appel 2009; Fine 2010). Afterward, when Christianity becomes the religion of Roman majority and power, a more complex relation takes root in which Judaism tends to mitigate its contrast with the new doctrine so as to flinch from any accusation of idolatry that Christianity itself might level at Judaism (Binder 2012). The same dialectics manifests itself within Christianity, in the relation between Catholics and Protestants. The former develops a rhetoric legitimizing various divine simulacra (Eucharist, images, relics, saints, seals; see Bedos-Rezak 2012); the latter seeks to recover the purity of Jewish monotheism while continuing to affirm the idea of incarnation.

With the expansion of Christianity in the "Western and Eastern Indies" starting in the fifteenth century, a third dialectic takes root: cults that missionaries observe in their explorations are undoubtedly idolatries, but how should one interpret them—as relics of pagan pre-Christian cults, or as the result of the devil's initiative in the world (Bernard and Gruzinski 1988; MacCormack 1991)?[16]

Saints Smashing Idols

The visual topos of saints smashing idols stands at the center of this triple (external, internal, and global) dialectic. The Old Testament, as it was shown, almost obsessively dwells on the idea of destroying the "abominable idols." In Judaism, however, such an obsession never gives rise to an iconography. Symmetrically, Christianity never mentions the destruction of idols in its canonical texts, that is, the Gospels; instead, it produces an abundant iconography wherein saints are depicted in the act of destroying the idols of pagan antiquity, those of extra-European cults, and the idols fabricated by the devil.

The hypothesis of the present essay is that the iconography of saints smashing idols constitutes the visual strategy, stretching across several centuries,

16. See, e.g., Ponce de León (ca. 1500) 2004; Sánchez de Aguilar 1639; and Gonzalo de Balsalobre 2008; cf. Larco 2008.

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through which Catholicism proposes increasingly sophisticated formulations of its paradoxical dialectic with Judaism, Protestantism, and the religions of the New World. Like Abraham in the workshop of his father, saints become the trustworthy mediators of transcendence who destroy all false and idolatrous mediators. Behind the constant but various expressions of this iconography lies the need to justify the Catholic view on the simulacra of transcendence: the role of Christ and the saints, but also, paradoxically, of the saints' images. The iconography of saints smashing idols brings forth, indeed, a vertiginous *mise en abyme*, where legitimate images of legitimate mediators (the saints) destroy forbidden images of forbidden mediators (the idols). However, an evident short circuit slips into this paradox. How can one distinguish between the former and the latter? How can one depict a difference without bestowing upon idols that same visual presence that the moral content of the depiction is precisely meant to eradicate from them? How should one represent the destruction of an idol without affirming its presence? This is an extremely clear case of "iconoclash," as Peter Weibel suggests to designate these paradoxical iconoclasms (Latour and Weibel 2002, 184; Van Asselt et al. 2007).

Iconography and Idolatry

The aim of this essay is to establish an "iconography of idolatry," along the line evoked by Julia Reinhard Lupton (1996, 184) in *Afterlives of the Saints*: "An iconography of idolatry, then, would categorize and interpret the different verbal and visual images (the Golden Calf, for example) through which conceptions of idolatry have been formalized and transmitted. In the plural, the phrase 'iconographies of idolatries' implies that those images fall into distinct clusters or discourses, in this case, the Jewish, Greco-Roman, Catholic and Protestant ideologies of the religious image." The essay constructs a typology of "iconographies of idolatries" through semiotic analysis of the visual topos of saints smashing idols. It articulates the different destructive operations that the Christian image attributes to saints. Examples come mainly from Italian Catholic art, considered as representative of ideal saintly types.

Saints Rejecting Idols

Saints can confine themselves either to refusing to sacrifice to idols or to worship them, like Saint Christine in a sixteenth-century painting by Paolo Veronese for the church of Saint-Antony in Torcello, near Venice (fig. 1); or Saint Susanne in a sixteenth-century fresco by Cesare Nobbia in the church of Saint-Susanne in Rome; or Saint Bibiana, despite the insistence of Ruffine, in a

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Figure 1. Paolo Caliari, also known as Paolo Veronese, *Saint Christine Instigated to Worship Idols* (1580–88). Oil on canvas. 209 × 198 cm. Museum of Torcello, Venice. Photographic reproduction, 1880–1910. Photograph collection of the Federico Zeri Foundation, Bologna. http://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/.

seventeenth-century fresco by Pietro da Cortona for the church of Saint-Bibiana in Rome; or like Saint Agatha in a seventeenth-century painting by Andrea Camassei, now at the National Gallery of Ancient Art at the Barberini Palace in Rome; or like Saint Valentine in an anonymous seventeenth-century painting; or like Saint Valentine, again, together with Saint Laurence, in a canvas by Francesco Fernandi (eighteenth century) for the cathedral of Saint-Laurence in Viterbo.

Veronese's canvas is divided into two parts by the vertical caesura of the temple's classical architecture. The image is traversed by a diagonal tension developing from left to right. One sees, at bottom left, the saint, surrounded by

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a multitude of women, her shoulder grabbed by a pagan priest's right hand, and at top right, the idol's statue, placed on a high pedestal and worshipped by four idolatrous women. In the group on the left, three characters that surround the saint (the priest and the two women) all reproduce the same gestural dynamics: with one hand they touch Christine, while with the other they point toward the idol. The instigation is intensified by a second circle of five women, in the background, who all look at the saint and express their anguish with iconographically stereotypical gestures (touching their chest, for instance). How is it possible, they seem to exclaim, that Christine refuses to pay homage to the statue?

Indeed, by a simple gesture of her right hand the saint contradicts the vectoriality of the image and points in the opposite direction, far from the idol, toward the bottom-left corner. The most interesting aspect of the canvas is that Veronese justifies Christine's reaction through the iconography of the idol itself. At the figurative level, it presents itself as the statue of a frivolous deity, devoted to music (the cithara in the left hand, a somewhat anachronistic bow in the right hand) and lasciviousness (nudity), as well as a distracted deity who, despite invocations by the idolaters, looks elsewhere). At the plastic level,[17] the statue appears faded, as though situated far away from its worshippers. The "exotic" features of vegetation appearing on top of the walls in the background of the statue, as well as the insouciant gaze of the idol, emphasize the plastic evocation of such a distance. Hence, the whole of this configuration contrasts with the simple gesture of Christine's right hand, pointing at the ground: whereas everybody incites her to worship a distant idol, which only exists in the fantasy of worshippers, the saint has found in herself, near her heart, a suitable object for her adoration. The dialectic between a pale idol and such a gesture of resistance translates the parallel conversion of Christine, as well as her opposition to idolatry. She does not smash any idols, but the force of her gesture transfers into the image, which in turn dismays the idol by discoloring it. This chromatic effect is even more evident in the original canvas than in the nineteenth-century photographic reproduction included here.

Saints Indirectly Destroying and Exorcising Idols

Saints can also incite the destruction of idols without physical contact, through the gaze or prayer, like Saint Stephen in a fifteenth-century painting by Martino

17. In Greimas's semiotics, the plastic level is the configuration of forms, colors, positions, and textures that underpins the figurative level of the image, that is, the level in which figures of the "macro-semiotics of the world" can be recognized and lexicalized. Abstract images contain a plastic level but not a figurative one. On the contrary, the figurative level of images is always underlain by a subjacent plastic dimension (Greimas 1984).

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di Bartolomeo di Biagio, now at the Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie in Frankfurt; or like Saint Bartholomew in another fifteenth-century painting, by Stefano d'Antonio di Vanni, currently in the Post collection in England; or like Saint Bartholomew, again, in a fifteenth-century predella by Nicolò Rondinelli, currently in the Musée du Petit Palais, Paris; or like Saint Sebastian in an anonymous sixteenth-century painting from Perugia; or in the seventeenth-century fresco *The Fall of the Idols*, by Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli, for the Sanctuary of the Virgin in Rho; or when the emperor Constantine, represented as a saint, orders the destruction of the idols in a seventeenth-century tempera on cardboard by Pietro da Cortona (fig. 2).

The tempera on cardboard, meant to prepare the execution of a tapestry completed the following year, condenses in a striking image the paradox of the Christian relation to idols. A column traverses the scene longitudinally, thus separating two temporal stages of the visual tale. On the right, framed by an arch through which the natural light of a bluish sky penetrates, Constantine, surrounded by two characters filled with emotion and clothed in carmine stoles, crushes with his left foot the grayish fragments of a smashed idol. The headless neck of the beheaded statue is clearly visible, whereas a piece of the body, unrecognizable, is subject to the both physical and political weight of the emperor. The 324 edict that shut down the pagan temples is here depicted by a scroll grasped in Constantine's right hand, whereas his left hand points with majesty toward the other side of the image. There, on the left, two characters with flexed muscles are placing a golden statue of Jesus on a pedestal, exactly the same one that, beforehand, would have supported the smashed idol. Involuntarily, the general configuration of the scene reproduces the ambiguity of the Christian relation to idols: customarily reading the image from left to right, indeed, one would have the impression that the two men are not installing the statue of Jesus, but removing it; and that the fragments on the ground, as a consequence, represent the statue itself of Jesus after destruction. Nevertheless, both a visual and a material code intervene so as to rule out such paradoxical interpretation, while implying the existence of the "wrong" reading; on the one hand, the image emphasizes the golden color of Jesus's statue, in contrast with the gray pagan marble, as though aiming at establishing a chromatic hierarchy of simulacra; on the other hand, the golden color integrates the statue in a triangulation whose other vertices are the cross, in the center of the scene, and the two votive lamps burning at each side of the column. The image confirms the religious truth of the statue of Jesus, simultaneously showing its superiority in relation over the destroyed idol, precisely through this triangulation of the

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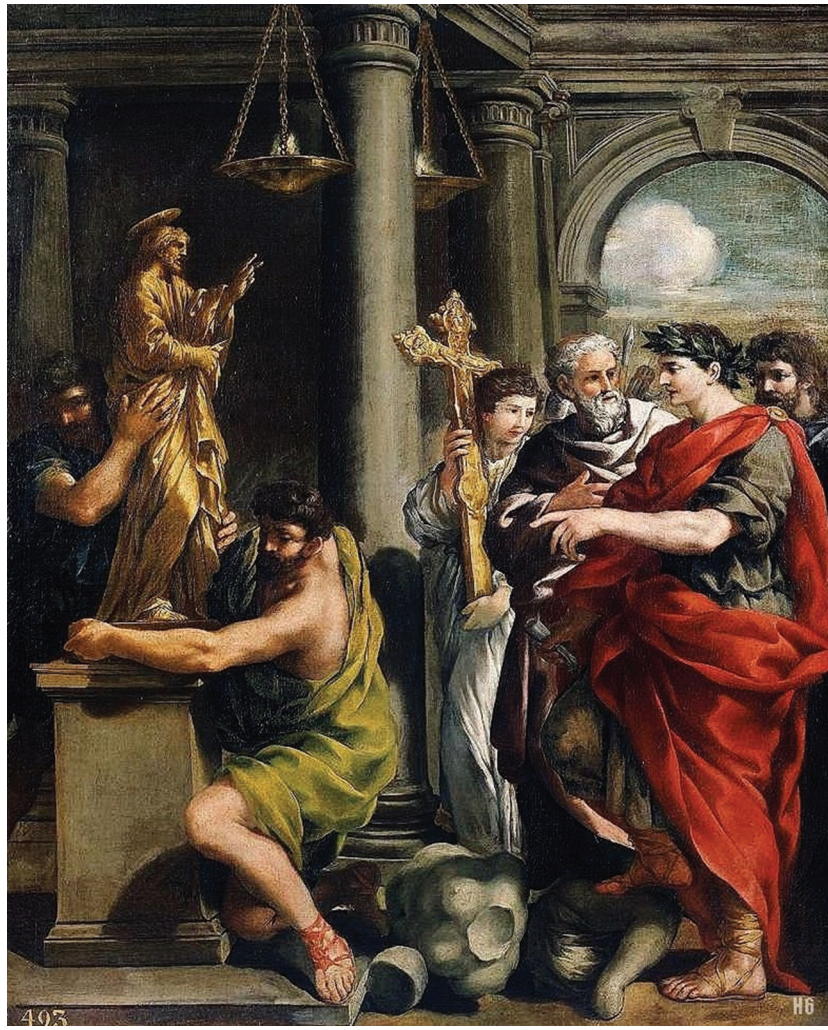


Figure 2. Pietro Berrettini, also known as Pietro da Cortona, *Constantine Prescribes the Destruction of the Idols* (1633–36). Tempera on cardboard. 340 × 326 cm. National Gallery of Ancient Art at the Barberini Palace, Rome. Photograph collection of the Federico Zeri Foundation, Bologna. http://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/.

Peircean typology of icon-symbol-index (by resemblance, the icon of the statue of Jesus; by conventional association, the symbol of the cross; and by physical contiguity, the index of spiritual light).

Additionally, saints can also convince a converted king to destroy pagan idols, like Saint Bartholomew with King Polemius in a fourteenth-century polyptych by Simone da Cusighe, currently at the Galleria Giorgio Franchetti

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in Venice; or else they can exorcise the idols, like Saint Paul in a seventeenth-century painting by Francesco Maglioli (fig. 3).

In a majestic scenario of Roman ruins with high Corinthian columns, which Maglioli composes as usual, a crowd traversed by a wave of excitement gathers behind the saint, who, in the center of the image, under the vault of a high arch, raises his arm against the idols—giant statues placed in a dilapidated temple on huge marble pedestals. The scene refers to numerous passages of the New Testament in which Paul condemns pre-Christian idolatry (1 Cor. 8:1, 4, 10; 1 Cor. 10:19, 28; 1 Cor. 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Thess. 1:9).[18] Evidently, ruins symbolize the defeat of the pagan pantheon upon the arrival of Christianity. Nevertheless, the most interesting aspect of the representation lies elsewhere. Struck by Paul's exorcism, the statues of the idols take life, twist, seem to physically feel the force of the exorcism. Paradoxically, then, their reaction to Paul's gesture underlines their agency. Exorcism, indeed, would not make any sense if not targeting some beings endowed with intentionality, capable of evil acting in the world. By giving visual expression to a theological tradition, the image interprets the idols not as inert objects, but as demonic presences. Said otherwise, the fault of the worshippers of idols does not consist in attributing agency to objects that are deprived of it, but in invoking a malicious agency, contrary to the Christian God. As a consequence, here the saint cannot confine himself, like in the previous images, to smashing the idols; he must also subjugate them by the force of exorcism. Therein consists the ambiguity of exorcism: it confirms the force of the idol that it crushes.

Saints Directly Destroying Idols

In contrast, other iconographies entail a direct and more or less violent action: saints make idols "fall," like Saint Urban in an anonymous eleventh-century fresco in the church of S. Urbano alla Caffarella, Rome; they "overthrow the table of idolaters," like Saint Alexander, by kicking it, in a sixteenth-century canvas by Enea Salmeggia, currently in the gallery of the Academy of Carrara; they smash the idols with sticks or even with a crosier, like Saint Benedict in a seventeenth-century altarpiece by Agostino Scilla for the Church of Saint-Paul in Messina (now in the regional museum); in certain cases, for instance in the seventeenth-century *Destruction of Idols* by Giovanni Ghisolfi, in the Sestieri collection in Rome, several characters set themselves against the idols, some crushing them with their feet, others hitting them with a hammer (fig. 4).

18. See Acts 19:24–41 on the adoration of the idols in Ephesus.

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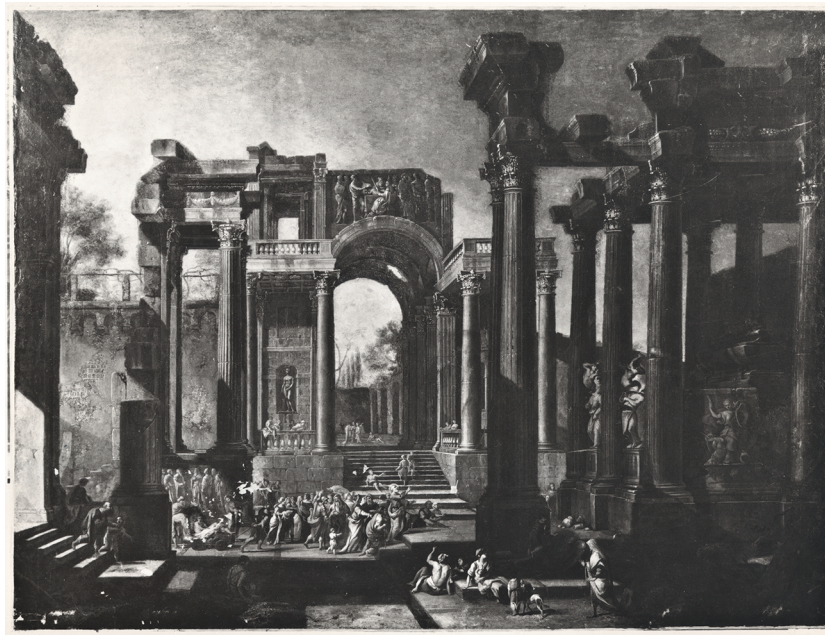


Figure 3. Francesco Maglioli (1635–99), *Saint Paul Exorcises the Idols*. Oil on canvas. 155 × 210 cm. Private collection. Photograph collection of the Federico Zeri Foundation, Bologna. http://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/.

The sentence inscribed in the cartouche held by the angel floating above the scene—"abstulit opprobrium"—provides a clue to its interpretation. The phrase is drawn from the Latin translation of 1 Sam. 17:26, in a passage that relates the victory of David over Goliath: "And David said to the men who stood by him, 'What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and *takes away the reproach* from Israel?'" The one who "abstulit opprobrium" is therefore David. Another passage, 2 Sam. 5:21, recounts the consequences of this victory over the Philistines' idolatry: "And the Philistines left their idols there, and David and his men carried them away." And another, 1 Chron. 14:12 narrates the same episode but mentions the destruction of the idols explicitly: "And they left their gods there, and David gave command, and they were burned." According to the image, then, David is the one who "took away the reproach of Israel," for he had the idols of the enemy destroyed. Nevertheless, it should not be neglected that the canvas, executed by a Christian painter, undoubtedly delivers a figural and typological reading of such destruction of idols in the Old Testament. Indeed, the sentence "abstulit opprobrium" is quoted, in the Vulgate, in a passage that recounts Elisabeth's pregnancy: "Thus the Lord has done

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Figure 4. Giovanni Ghisolfi (1650–83), *The Destruction of Idols*. Oil on canvas. Private collection. Photograph collection of the Federico Zeri Foundation, Bologna. http://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/.

to me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men" (Luke 1:25). The two "reproaches" are, in fact, related: on the one hand, the human creation of idols and, on the other hand, a miraculous procreation that announces (and will announce through John the Baptist) the divine incarnation. Late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century Christian homiletics probably inspired the painter. In *La rete apostolica nel mare del mondo alla pesca dell'huomo* (The apostolic net in the sea of the world fishing for human beings), by Fr. Bartolomeo di San Francesco, a collection of Lent sermons published in Lucca in 1710 (by Pellegrino Frediani), the thirty-sixth *predica* (sermon), dedicated to resurrection, reads,

> *et abstulit opprobrium ex Israel*. Hora dalla figura al figurato, dall'ombra alla luce, dal segno al segnato; a voi tocca devote vergini, a voi venerande matrone, a voi tutte Donne christiane; accordare i suoni, i balli, et i canti, a' canti, a' balli, et a' suoni delle Donne hebree : e sonando, e ballando, e cantando, dire con loro alle glorie del Redentore : *percussit David decem millia, percussit philisteum, & abstulit opprobrium ex Israel*. È l'istesso che

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dire, quelle con la Sinagoga, e queste con la Chiesa, alle glorie di Christo resuscitato, *resurrexit sicut dixit*, alleluja.[19]

The destruction of the idols in the Old Testament is therefore presented as prefiguration of the incarnation, that is, of the advent of a deity that, while being the truthful God of Israel, manifests himself nevertheless by means of his son, and therefore through human and perceptible form. The canvas translates this paradoxical theology of the figure through a disquieting iconography, where the idol, smashed with a hammer,[20] keeps the appearance of a body in the flesh. Sort of saint smashing idols of the Old Testament, David crushes the idol with his feet, but at the same time he invokes, with the index of his left hand, the authority that he receives directly from Heaven. Indeed, it is by virtue of this invisible transcendence, incarnated in Christ, that the index of the right hand, on the other side, points at and condemns every other visible figuration of the deity. However, the structural features of the pictorial language does not let the canvas represent the destruction of the idol without attributing to it a life, a life that dies under the blows of the iconoclasts, but is in all similar to the life of those who destroy it.

Female Saints Smashing Idols

The iconography of saints smashing idols seems to be underpinned by a gender differentiation: whereas female saints passively refuse to worship idols, male saints actively destroy them. There are, however, some fluctuations to this logic, for instance, in the beautiful seventeenth-century canvas *Saint Christine Smashing Idols*, by Onorio Marinari, where the female saint smashes the idols on her little table (fig. 5).

The image seeks to represent, in a single instant, the chronology of the idols' destruction, distinguishing between a "before" (the little statue of Diana in the right hand of the saint) and an "after" (the same statue destroyed, in the left hand).[21] The posture of the saint, diverting her head and gaze from the idol,

19. "*et abstulit opprobrium ex Israel*. Now from the figure to what is figured, from shadow to light, from sign to signified; it is up to you, devout virgins, to you, venerable matrons, to you all, Christian women; tuning sounds, dances, and songs to the songs, dances, and sounds of Jewish women: and by playing, dancing, and singing, extolling with them the glories of the Savior: *percussit David decem millia, percussit philisteum, & abstulit opprobrium ex Israel*. That is tantamount to extolling—those with the Synagogue, and these with the Church—the glories of the resurrected Christ, *resurrexit sicut dixit*, *alleluia*."

20. Is that a reference to the iconography of Asa?

21. Early modern images often resort to this visual convention in order to represent action: two states of the same object are represented side by side within the same scene; cf. Eugeni (1999).

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Figure 5. Onorio Marinari, *Saint Christine Smashing Idols* (1680–89). Oil on canvas. 71 × 95 cm. New York (private collection). Photograph collection of the Federico Zeri Foundation, Bologna. http://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/.

emphasizes the temporal sequence of iconoclasm. However, the effort of pictorial representation stresses the ambiguity of the visual tale. First, one of the statuettes of Diana presents itself as perfectly seductive in its integrity, to such a point that a photograph of this canvas, in the photographic collection of the Federico Zeri Foundation in Bologna, bears as caption, in English, "A Lady Holding a Statuette of Diana." The caption is evidently incorrect, but it is somehow justified by the ambiguity of the image. Second, even when the painter visually "destroys" the idol, he must make sure that it is recognizable as a smashed version of the statuette of Diana, that is, as the result of Saint Christine's iconoclasm. Such a need, however, bestows an iconic presence, and therefore a potentially idolatrous existence, upon the fragments of the statue. Third, a strange resemblance looms between the face of the saint, looking away from pagan idolatry, and the visage of the still standing statue.

These three paradoxes summarize the challenges to Christian representations of iconoclasm: (1) one cannot visually recount the destruction of idols without visually evoking their integrity; (2) one cannot make sure that the fragments of the idol are recognized as such without attributing to them an iconic pres-

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ence; (3) one cannot avoid invoking a visual echo between the representation of idols and the representation of bodies, despite every effort that the image makes as to underline the difference (color, texture, evocation of materiality, etc.). Moreover, even more problematically, these three lines of pictorial paradox ultimately refer to the paradoxical character of the incarnation of Jesus as dogma: how can a god incarnate without betraying his divinity?

Old Testament "Saints"

The typology and therefore the iconography of saints smashing idols is further complicated by the fact that, as already seen in the canvas by Giovanni Ghisolfi, Old Testament episodes are continuously represented by Christian art in the perspective of "typological" prefiguration.[22] Paradoxically, these references often aim at affirming the superiority of the Christian image, and mainly of incarnation, over the pagan idols of Greco-Roman antiquity.[23] Besides Abraham, the list of Old Testament smashers of idols celebrated by Christian art also includes Hezekiah and Josiah.[24] Episodes of the apocrypha relating the destruction of idols upon the arrival of the Holy Family (see above) also give rise to an iconography (fig. 6), as in the splendid *Fall of the Idols during the Flight to Egypt* by the Master of Bedford, executed in 1423 and showing a sort of "suicide" of the idol.[25] Finally, the Apostles Matthew, John, and Paul are associated with the destruction of idols. Paul persuades several magicians of Ephesus to burn their pagan idols; Matthew convinces a converted king to destroy his pagan idols; and Saint John's arrival in Patmos is often represented as triggering the fall of local idols.[26]

Missionary Saints Destroying Idols

With the fifteenth-century colonial and missionary expansion of Western Europe, new modern saints became protagonists of the destruction of the "devilish" idols of the New World. The large altarpiece *Miracles of Saint François Xavier*, painted by Peter Paul Rubens in 1617–18 for the cathedral of Antwerp, contains a "triumph of the faith" that essentially consists in the destruction of the

22. This time, in the sense of Auerbach's *Figura* (1939).

23. See the series of frescos *Abraham and the Idolaters* (1468–84), painted by Benozzo Gozzoli on the north wall of the cemetery of Pisa.

24. See *King Hezekiah Prescribes the Destruction of Idols*, copper engraving by Matthaeus Merian I (1593–1650) in *Iconum Biblicarum*, pt. 2, 127.

25. The episode customarily appears in the iconography of the flight to Egypt, for instance, in sixteenth-century Dutch iconography, in several seventeenth-century Russian icons, etc.

26. See the Anglo-Saxon hagiographies by Aelfric d'Eynsham (ca. 950–ca. 1010).

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Figure 6. Master of Bedford (1410–30), *Fall of the Idols during the Flight to Egypt*. Detail of the illumination of folio 83r. *Bedford Hours*. British Library, MS 18850. © The British Library Board, Add. 18850 f83r.

"devilishly horned" statues supposedly worshipped in Asia before Saint Francis Xavier's evangelization and the mass conversions that it triggered (fig. 7).[27]

Hagiographic Sources on the Destruction of Idols

Christian hagiographic sources are replete with episodes where saints become martyrs by destroying idols. These include (in the second century) the twin

27. For a detailed analysis, see Leone (2010, 471–79).

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Figure 7. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Miracles of Francis Xavier* (1617–18). Oil on canvas. 535 × 395 cm. © KHM-Museumsverband.

martyrs Florus and Lorus, two stonecutters executed because they had organized the destruction of the temple that they themselves had worked to build; Abercius of Hierapolis (who died in 167), to whom an angel of the Lord inspired the destruction of pagan idols; Julian of Dalmatia, executed in 160, accused of having destroyed some idols through his "magic"; Saint Paraskevi (who died in

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170), who smashed some idols by a simple sign of the cross; the martyrs Speusippus, Eleusippus, Meleusippus, and their grandmother Leonilla (who all died in 175), who persuaded the inhabitants of their region to destroy all the idols; and also Glykeria (who died in 177), a Roman virgin executed because she had a statue of Jupiter fall during a pagan festival. In the third century, similarly, we have Saint Charalampus, whose courage under torture convinced Gallina, the daughter of the emperor Severus, to destroy all the pagan idols; Christine of Tyra (who died in the third century), daughter of a pagan governor, tortured by her father because she had defenestrated some idols; Tatiana of Rome (who died in 225), tortured and beheaded on the pretext that her prayers had made a statue of Apollo fall; the Armenian martyr Polyeuctus of Melitene, who tipped over and crushed under his feet the twelve idols of a religious procession; Agatha of Palermo (who died in 251), whose prayers provoked an earthquake that destroyed the idols of the city; Heliconis of Thessaloniki (who died in the third century), who, persecuted, pretended to have abandoned Christianity, asked to be left alone in the pagan temple, and destroyed all the idols therein; Sozon of Cilicia (who died in the late third century), who smashed the hand of a golden idol in order to distribute its fragments among the poor; Victor of Marseille (who died in 290), who kicked a statue of Jupiter, overthrowing it; Mocius of Amphipolis (who died in 295), who tipped an altar of idols and, after invoking the name of Christ, had them smashed in a thousand fragments. In the fourth century, Sisimios and Artemon (who died in 303), who dismayed and burned some idols; Blaise of Sebastea (who died in 316), whom some Russian icons depict in the act of mocking idols, thus becoming a martyr; Theodore Stratelates (who died in 319), a military chief in Heraclea Pontica under the emperor Licinius, who pretended to offer a sacrifice to the pagan gods, gathered all the golden and silver idols in his house, had them smashed, and gave the fragments to the poor; and Acacius of Apamea (who died in the fourth century), who through praying had the local idols fall on two occasions. Among the best-known saints, one can also mention Georges (fourth century); Helena, the mother of Constantine (fourth century); and Nicholas (fourth century), who destroyed the temples of Diana and other pagan temples in the city of Myra. Later, Gregory the Great (who died at the beginning of the seventh century) prescribed the destruction of the pagan temples of England; Bonifacius (who died in 754) knocked down a chestnut tree consecrated to the Norse god Thor in order to build a chapel; and so on.

This rich hagiographic tradition is often accompanied by an even more abundant iconography, where the destruction of the idols is staged by a mul-

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tiplicity of narrative and visual forms. The visual presentation of these destructions often seems hazardous, but, more often, it seeks to translate a precise conception of idolatry into an iconic tale.

Conclusion: Idolatry and Self-Definition

Jewish scholars, Christian exegetes, and Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox theologians have never ceased to elaborate their increasingly sophisticated thoughts about idolatry. Indeed, by defining idolatry, each religious tradition has sought to establish a network of contrastive relations meant to define its identity as a community. Jews were those who had renounced the idolatry of pre-Abrahamic "deities" but also those who mistrusted the Christian ideas of Incarnation and Trinity. Christians, in their turn, affirmed themselves through rejecting the idolatry of the pagan gods in the Old World and stigmatizing the cult of "deities" in the New. Protestants defined themselves through dismissing the Catholic idolatry of saints, images, and relics; furthermore, the various branches of Protestantism differentiated themselves by how radical such dismissal was. Catholics searched for a paradoxical self-definition, based on a typological reading of the Old Testament and on rejection of old and new pagan idols, but also on the defense of legitimate simulacra and mediators, such as saints and images (Cousinié 2000). Moreover, all (Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Calvinists, Lutherans, etc.) advocated the expulsion of "superstition," of that popular religiosity that accompanies the whole history of religions.

This effort of religious self-definition through definition of idolatry developed on two levels. On the first, it crystallized in theoretical and theological systematizations. In Judaism, the Treatise of Idolatry (*avodah zarah*, meaning "foreign worship") in the Babylonian Talmud (Fontana 2011) or the chapter on the laws of idolatry in Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* explicitly deal with the topic. In Christianity, Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Justin's apologies, Clement of Alexandria's *Exhortation of the Greeks* and *Stromatae*, Origen, and then Lactantius's *Divine Institutions*, Augustine's *City of God*, through Thomas Aquinas's systematization in the *Summa* (2a.2ae, 92–94) are all texts that revolve around the urgency to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate embodiments of transcendence (Rubiés 2006, 571–96). Then, the epochal split of Protestantism (Richeome 1619), the reaction of the Council of Trent, and the internal debate in Catholicism and Protestantism (Leone 2010) are all steps in the progressive articulation of the Christian conceptualization of idolatry, which is also a process of self-conceptualization. This implicit practice of self-definition occurs not only inwardly but also outwardly, for instance, in the way in which

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medieval travelogues through Asia invoke, describe, and stigmatize "the marvelous idolatries of the East" (on the fourteenth century, see Odoric of Pordenone's *Travels in Asia*; Ludovico de Varthema 1510). A similar self-definition through stigmatization took place later, in early modern missionary reports from the New World, as they "discovered" that evangelization had not conquered yet the entire world and that some "idolaters" were hiding in faraway lands (on the fifteenth century, see Ramon Pané's *América: Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los indios*) (Henn 2014). Cortés, Andrés de Tapia, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, Pedro de Cieza de León, Pedro Pizarro, Agustín de Zairate, Diego Muñoz Camargo: the reflection of all these early modern Catholic authors on the "idolatries" of the New World is unceasing and runs parallel to the internal repression of Judaism and popular "superstition" (Ciruelo 1538). A surreal synthesis of this entire tradition, Athanasius Kircher's works in the seventeenth century—*Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652–54), *China Illustrata* (1667)—represent a titanic as well as absurd effort to retrieve a historical and theological coherence from the multiplicities of idolatries.

Alongside this theological, ethnographic, and historical reflection, the definition of idolatry becomes an almost exclusively verbal tale in Judaism and Protestantism, a verbal and visual tale in Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. The iconographic topos of the saints smashing idols plays a central role in these tales: it translates the theological idea of idolatry into an iconic narrative of destruction but proposes, at the same time, an iconic interpretation of it. The iconography of idolatries, indeed, does not confine itself to transposing a theological conception into images. It proposes, sometimes explicitly, sometimes between the lines, a visual conceptualization of idolatry. So as to seize it, one must study it through a complex and interdisciplinary methodology, where iconology, semiotics, and connoisseurship intertwine in order to attribute a specific meaning to the image in the context of a cultural history of idolatry. For each representation of "saints smashing idols" one must, at the historical level, reconstruct the context of the image, its links with the hagiographic tradition, and above all with the way in which it transposes a theology of idolatry. By approaching the destructions of idols through a semiotic grid, moreover, one must articulate a detailed typology of iconoclastic types and operations, as well as a reflection on their results (the idol falls, is smashed, burned, fragmented, etc.). Finally, historical contextualization and structural study must be followed by a procedure of connoisseurship in the manner of Aby Warburg: when the Catholic or Orthodox image stages the destruction of idols, it cannot avoid bestowing on them a visual form and, therefore, having

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them reborn.[28] The riskiest stage of research consists, therefore, in retrieving the forms of ancient art in the snatches of iconoclasm. What can be recognized in the fragments of smashed idols? In what paradoxical way does the Christian art "resurrect" ancient art on the pretext of representing its holy destruction (Panofsky and Saxl 1933)? For instance, when Martino di Bartolomeo di Biagio depicts Saint Stephen smashing idols, he places in the kiosk on top of the gate of the city some classical statues, whose fragments cascade upon the saint's arrival (Van Os 1985) (fig. 8).

The spectator of the image recognizes the visual tale of the saint smashing idols;[29] the learned spectator, furthermore, refers the tale to the self-definition of Christianity in relation to pagan idolatry;[30] at the same time, paradoxically, she/he reactivates a visual knowledge of the pagan art in the image itself of its destruction. Through this visual exercise of destroying and resurrecting of the image, indeed, the Catholic painter transmits the sentiment of a "reasoned and reasonable iconoclasm," where the simulacra of transcendence are not purely and simply rejected but narratively and visually distinguished from idols.

"Inventing an enemy," as Umberto Eco puts it (2011) is a central rhetoric of self-definition not only in social but also in religious life. In Abrahamic monolatry, the institution of a new religious community relies on the careful selection of a corpus of sacred texts, and on the concomitant exclusion and stigmatization of apocrypha. At the same time, this interplay of inclusion and exclusion, legitimization and delegitimization must apply to liturgy as well, meant as the series of socially shared habits through which a religious community defines and attributes spiritual agency. If Judaism, on the one hand, mostly defines itself by subtraction, by expelling all illegitimate sources of agency through verbal (sacred texts) and narrative (liturgical texts) stigmatization, Christianity, on the other hand, must simultaneously work by subtraction (the exclusion of "pagan," native, and "superstitious" agencies) and addition (differentiating itself from Judaism by admitting an incarnated transcendence). This tension between subtraction and addition then brings about the internal articulation of Christian views on idolatry, but remains paradoxical and even contradictory, above all in hagiographic and iconographic tales of iconoclasm. Smashing "the idols" is a fundamental operation of religious self-

28. The bibliography of Warburg's method is vast; for an introduction, see Johnson (2012).

29. By "spectator" I mean the cooperative, ideal "reader" of the image, someone who follows its implicit instructions for decoding and interpreting.

30. By "learned spectator" I mean a spectator who is aware of the cultural implications of the image and is therefore able to read it with reference to both its explicit and implicit context.

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Figure 8. Martino di Bartolomeo di Biagio (1410–35), *Saint Stephen Destroys the Idols*. Painting on table. Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt. © Städel Museum – U. Edelmann / ARTOTHEK.

definition, and yet paradoxically points at the inerasable presence of the "Other," of alternative ways of situating the same spiritual forces that are believed to underpin the world. The abundance and variety through which Christianity represents its heroes in the act of smashing idols, indeed, is comprehensible only in relation to this implicit fear that the mysterious agencies bridled by sacred writing and liturgy might resurface unbridled elsewhere, through different bodies, speaking unknown languages, and acting in unfathomable ways.

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