

Iconoclastic Developments of Eight Century Byzantium

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I. Introduction

By the time the iconoclastic controversy came to a head in 8th century Byzantium, the tradition of icon veneration had been well established in the Church since at least the 4th century. There are significant examples of the use Christian images before this, but this was during the time of the underground Church when there were no Church buildings or public worship. Thus the only remnants of primitive Christian iconography are primarily in the catacombs. This is not to say that there were no objections to images in the Church before the iconoclast controversy. Some early Christian writers were opposed to them like Eusebius of Caesarea and Epiphanius of Salamis -whose writings were eventually used by iconoclasts (Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, 30). The 4th century Spanish council of Elvira cautioned against their use and especially against the painting of them on the Church's walls. A 7th century heretical sect from Armenia, called the Paulicians, were the first group to take a formal stand against icons. It is important to note that this group was heretical and did not represent the position of the Armenian Church. In fact one of the earliest defenses of icons was written by an Armenian priest in the 7th century, Vertanes the Grammarian (Kochakian, *Art in the Armenian Church*).

By the late 6th and 7th centuries icon veneration dramatically increased as holy images were more and more recognized as having miraculous powers. It is believed that the dramatic increase in image veneration in Byzantium was a corollary result of increased fear from enemies (like Muslims, Lombards and Hunnics) mounting on all sides of the Byzantine Empire (Hussey, 31). Faith in the power of icons provided comfort and security for those suffering from the ever increasing external distress. But it was not until the 8th century that the arguments for and against icons were really articulated (Hussey, 34).

II. The Iconoclast's Position

As mentioned above there had long been sentiments in the Church against pictorial representations before the bitter controversy broke out in the 8th century. Some objected to the use of icons because the reverence given to them seemed more of a superstitious nature than something proceeding from Christian faith. The most common objection to icons was the Mosaic prohibition against graven images (Ex. 20:4-5). Many iconoclasts argued that true Christian worship should be "in spirit and in truth" rather than in need of images. Of course aberrations existed within the Church of an idolatrous nature which gave support to the iconoclast position. Some of these aberrations were the result of vestiges of paganism carried over into Christianity by converts (Hussey, 33). The above can be summed up by the following: "Within the Byzantine Empire there was an age-long undercurrent of anxiety concerning the growing popular use -and abuse- of

icons and this was used to support what was essentially an imperial initiative owing its effectiveness to Leo III and Constantine V” (Hussey, 43).

III. The Iconodules Position

To the simple and unlearned, icons offered comfort and a feeling of protection. But the miraculous efficacy of such objects could be defended by the more learned on Biblical grounds. For instance there were miracles involving material objects which took place in the Gospels (Mt 9:20) and the Book of Acts (19:11-12). Images were long recognized as a means of educating the illiterate. Yet icons were seen as much more than this and became understood as ways of bringing the beholder into contact with the Divine. Icons were also seen as revealing the Divine nature which is in all of us and is especially evident in the saints. Finally iconodules defended the point that Christ Himself, although Divine, could be represented pictorially because He also truly became man. His incarnation changed the prohibition against visual representation of God. This had already become a tenet of Orthodoxy by the late 7th century (ibid, 33). Eventually the iconodules came to affirm that as a result of the incarnation, not only was it allowable to depict Christ pictorially, this was a hallmark of Orthodoxy.

IV. How the Iconoclast Controversy Began

Some believed there were Muslim influences behind iconoclast sentiments since the Byzantine Empire shared its eastern borders with the Arab world and most probably was influenced by it (Hussey 34, 36). Others believed the iconoclasts to be more under the sway of Jewish influence, since, for instance, they cited Mosaic texts (ibid, 35). Whether there was any validity to these claims or not, the fact was there was growing iconoclastic support in Asia Minor in 8th century. The iconoclasts soon gained control with the support of the Emperor Leo III. His first action was the removal of a mosaic image of Christ over the entrance to the Imperial palace buildings in autumn of 726. This, in turn, provoked the citizens of Constantinople (ibid, 37). By 730 came the first formal edict and a decree was made for the destruction of the icons of the saints. The Patriarch of Constantinople, Germanus, refused to sign the decree and was therefore forced to retire. His replacement Anastasius was an iconoclast and supporter of Leo (ibid, 38).

Leo’s son and successor, Constantine V intensified the attack against icons in practice and in theory. The argument against icons was made more sophisticated. This was countered by the great champion of icons, John of Damascus who wrote on Christological grounds from Muslim territory (ibid, 38-39). Constantine took his father’s work a step further by trying to gain the approval of a synod. The iconoclast, Theodosius of Ephesus, presided over 338 bishops but with no representatives from any of the major Patriarchates (i.e. Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem). Even so, the iconoclasts claimed that this council of 754 was the 7th Ecumenical Council. The former Patriarch Germanus and John of Damascus were condemned. The council’s anathemas were directed against “idolatry... and the material nature of images. It was stressed that an image of Christ either circumscribed an uncircumscribable Godhead and

confused the two natures (like Eutychian Monophysites), or divided the human from the divine Person (like Nestorians, *ibid*, 40). Instead, the iconoclasts maintained that the only true icon of Christ was the Eucharist and the only true image of a saint was the imitation of his virtues (*ibid*, 41).

V. The Restoration of the Icons

The advances and attacks of the iconoclasts continued until the death of Constantine V, in 755, after which iconoclasm began to die down. Constantine's son and successor, Leo IV was more moderate than his father and somewhat indifferent (Hussey, 44). Leo's wife, Irene, was an ardent supporter of icons. When Leo IV died and left his 10 year old son, Constantine VI, as his successor, Irene saw an opportunity to end iconoclasm. Although this restoration was not immediate, she did ultimately succeed. Tarasius was elected Patriarch of Constantinople and consecrated on Dec. 25, 784. He was a fair and judicious man and accepted his nomination on the condition that a new general council be called to repudiate the iconoclast council of 754. Both he and Irene petitioned the Pope of Rome for his support for a general council (*ibid*, 45). The Pope gave his support to the projected council and vowed to send two legates. The council, which began in 786, had to face the fact that the majority of the clergy were now iconoclasts. The iconoclasts caused such a disturbance during the proceedings, that the council had to be disbanded until other guards could be put in place (unsympathetic to the iconoclasts) who would keep the council orderly. The council began again in September, 787, in the Church of the Holy Wisdom and the presidency, according to custom, was given to Rome (*ibid*, 46-47). After extended discussions and references to the Fathers, the iconoclast penitents (who had not maltreated the iconophiles) were received back. Pope Hadrian's statement was read distinguishing between veneration of icons and that true worship which could be given to God alone (*ibid*, 48). The definition of the council thus stated:

“We define with all certainty and accuracy that just as the representation of the venerable and life-giving Cross, so the venerable and holy icons and painting or mosaic or any other appropriate medium, should be set up in the holy churches of God, and on the sacred vessels and vestments, on walls and on panels, both in houses and by the wayside and also the image of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, our undefiled Lady, the holy Theotokos, the angels worthy of honor and all holy and devout people. For the more often they are seen in figural representations, the more readily men are lifted up to remember their proto-types and long for them, and these should be given honorable veneration (*hyper-dulia*) but not that true worship (*latria*) of our faith which belongs to the Divine Nature alone.”

VI. Conclusion: The Triumph of Orthodoxy

Although the battle over icons continued for some time with either side alternately gaining control, it was ultimately the foundation laid by Nicea II which helped the Church triumph over the iconoclasts and restore the proper veneration of icons. The definitive

victory of the iconodules came in 843. Thereafter it has been commemorated on the Byzantine calendar on the day known as the “Triumph of Orthodoxy,” which falls on the 1st Sunday of the Great Fast (ibid, 63). “The most important and permanent result of the controversy was the firm establishment of icons in the daily life of the orthodox” (ibid, 67). To the orthodox, icons “had a sacramental value” and “were held to be possessed of special graces” (ibid, 68). It can be argued that the iconoclasts brought about some benefit for the Church in that they helped her to address the problem of idolatrous acts of devotion towards icons. The iconoclastic controversy also gave the Church the opportunity to define its true position toward holy images: “Their presence stressed the strongly held belief in the sanctity of matter, a belief that found its fulfillment in *theosis* or the deification of human beings” (ibid, 68). Although this concept can be found in the writings of Church Fathers like St. Augustine, neither the use icons nor the concept of deification ever became stressed in the west.