

# Evaluating the Iconoclast Controversy

Historical Theology

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## REVIEW OF THE THEOLOGICAL ISSUES SURROUNDING THE ICONOCLAST CONTROVERSY

**(i) Do icons violate the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment which forbids the making of images? Iconoclasts** took their stand on this command, and rejected all manmade religious icons. The only proper visual images of Christ, they argued, were the bread and wine of the Eucharist, the sign of the cross, and the Chi-Rho sign. (The cross must not be confused with the crucifix. A cross is empty. A crucifix has the figure of Christ hanging on it. Iconoclasts rejected the crucifix, but accepted the cross.) In response, **the Iconodules**...held that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment forbids the making of Pagan icons, images of false gods, not icons of Christ who is the Truth. They admitted that in the Old Testament times, icons of the true God were impossible, owing to His invisible spiritual nature; but His taking flesh in Jesus Christ, they argued, had changed all this. Furthermore, they did not regard icons as “graven images”; icons were not statues “in the round”, but paintings or mosaics “in the flat”. (Needham, 106)

**ii) Does the fact that the Son of God became a man enable us to portray Him as a man?**

**Iconoclasts** said that only Christ Himself is the image of God; a picture cannot reproduce that image. All that a picture of Christ can depict is His human nature, not His divine nature; it therefore depicts only half of Christ, robbing Him of His deity. **Iconodules** argued that those who rejected pictures

of Christ were not taking seriously the fact that He became a true man. Before the incarnation, no picture of God was possible, because no-one had seen Him. In Jesus Christ, however, God has become man; and it is the mark of a real flesh-and-blood man that he can be seen and depicted.

**(iii) What was the practice of the early Church?**

This was in some ways the strongest argument of the **iconoclasts**. Up until the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the fathers of the Church did not set forth any theology of Christian icons, and sometimes condemned pictures of Christ; the positive veneration of icons they regarded as Pagan. When church buildings became common in the course of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, however, the practice of adorning them with icons of Christ was equally common. (Ibid. 108)

To get around the fact that they could not find much support for icons in the writings of the early Church fathers, **iconodules** appealed to an “unwritten tradition” within the Church in favor of icons. They pointed out that the great Church historian of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Eusebius of Caesarea, bore witness to this unwritten tradition in his *History of the Church*, even though Eusebius himself was personally opposed to icons.” (Ibid.)

**(iv) What was best for uneducated people who could not read? Iconoclasts**

said that icons would lead such people astray into idolatry: they would worship the icon as if it were the divine object. **Iconodules**, by contrast, argued that icons were like

a book for those who could not read: they portrayed the people and the stories of the Bible and early Church history, so that the illiterate could see and learn about them. (Ibid. 108-09)

## EVALUATING ICONOGRAPHY

(The following is taken from John B. Carpenter's article, Answering Eastern Orthodox Apologists Regarding Icons).

### What Is an Icon?

"We should differentiate between art (including imagery and decorations) and icons. Orthodox theologians and icon "writers" make that distinction themselves. "Icons are not 'art' in the modern sense of individual expression, although they have many aesthetic qualities. Icons are a collaboration between the writer and the spirit."<sup>9</sup>

"The Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America defines an icon as follows:

In the Orthodox Church an icon is a sacred image, a window into heaven. An image of another reality, of a person, time and place that is more real than here and now. More than art, icons have an important spiritual role.... The primary purpose of the icon is to aid in worship.<sup>11</sup>

"This is a crucial distinction. It means that the discovery of early Christian art does not necessarily mean the discovery of early Christian iconography.<sup>13</sup> EOAs frequently neglect this distinction when discussing the archaeological evidence, leaving the impression—wittingly or not—that any religious themed art is an icon and so the archaeological discovery of decorations and symbolism among early Christians is necessarily evidence of iconography.<sup>14</sup>

"Frequently EOAs make the case that since the Bible allows and even encourages images, such as the cherubim over the ark of the covenant and the bronze serpent Moses made for the snake bitten (Num 21), thus iconography is acceptable.<sup>15</sup>

"However, this reasoning conflates decorations and symbolic images with iconography.<sup>16</sup> But as we have seen, for an image to be an icon it must be used in worship. They may deny that the image itself is being worshipped but it is a tool in worship. This is not the case with the decorations of the original tabernacle, the later temple, and not even with the famous bronze serpent Moses made. Nowhere in scripture are we told that these decorations were involved with worship.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, when later the bronze serpent became used in worship, King Hezekiah had it destroyed (2 Kgs 18:4).

"So the discovery of decorations in catacombs or the synagogue and church of Dura Europos does not necessarily suggest iconography. One can still be "aniconic" (opposed to icons) and allow decorations. Aniconism is the belief that images should not be used in worship; it is opposition to icons but not necessarily to all images. There is a spectrum of aniconism. Rigorous aniconism insists that the natural or supernatural world should not be represented in any visible way.<sup>18</sup> Aniconism, then, is the belief that icons ought not be used.

"Thus, an aniconist could have religious art on the walls of his or her home, on the pictures in a wallet, or even where the Bible is taught so long as the images are not involved in "the framework where religion is performed."<sup>21</sup> That is, aniconism means that images are not used in worship (however one defines worship). Aniconism, at its barest, is imageless worship.

“Aniconism, then, covers a range from rigorous aniconism in which all images are forbidden, including secular art, in any contexts, whether secular or religious, to mediating views of some images being acceptable in non-religious contexts; to the laxest form of aniconism, that images of all kinds are acceptable, even as decorations in places of worship but not used in worship. It is the prohibition on using an image in acts of devotion that is the sine qua non of aniconism.”

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/answering-eastern-orthodox-apologists-regarding-icons/>

## WHAT ABOUT EXODUS 20:4-6?

<sup>4</sup>“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup>“You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, <sup>6</sup>but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (NASB)

Douglas K. Stuart, in his commentary on Exodus, states, “This commandment outlaws every sort of idolatry, in any form whatever. It also includes an explanation of how seriously God takes idolatry because of its ability to corrupt successive generations, keeping them from God’s blessing and forcing Him to mete out to them His wrath.” (Stuart, 449-50)

“Two common words for “idol” appear: *pesel* (here “idol”) and *temunah* (here “likeness”), the use of the two synonyms suggesting “any sort of idol.” Similarly, “any sort of thing” is prohibited from being depicted – thus the somewhat elaborate and obviously comprehensive delineation of prohibited sources for copying: “heaven above, earth beneath, waters below.” In other words, nothing from

anywhere can be copied and used as an object of veneration.” (Ibid. 450)

“The question might naturally be asked: Were not the tabernacle and its sacred objects such as the ark, objects to be venerated? The answer is decidedly no. They were objects associated with Yahweh, things that surrounded His self-manifestation and gave a sense of localization to His presence, but they were not in themselves—even remotely—objects that partook of the divine nature, as idols were thought to do for the supposed gods they represented. And the Israelites certainly neither *bowed down* to nor *worshiped* them.” (Ibid.)

## CONCLUSION

Should Icons be used in worship?

### Resources:

Needham, Nick. **2000 years of Christ’s Power, Volume 2, The Middle Ages, 7<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> Century**. Christian Focus Publications Ltd, 2016.

Stuart, Douglas K. **The New American Commentary: Exodus**. B & H Publishing Group, 2006.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine\\_Iconoclasm](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine_Iconoclasm)

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