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BYZANTINE ICONOCLASM AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE ISLAMIC ENVIRONMENT

The purpose of this presentation is not so much the tracing of Islamic influences on Byzantium—of which in essential matters there are not too many—but to suggest and illustrate a different basis for what intellectual and emotional parallelisms do exist between the two hostile neighbors, the world of Islam and the world of Greek Christendom; in the process, a slight refinement of the concept of influence itself may emerge.

On October 4, 787, at the fifth session of the Second Council of Nicaea, which marked the end of the first iconoclastic period and the official restoration of image worship, the presbyter John of Jerusalem, representative of the Anatolian bishops, read to the assembled clergy a prepared statement (that had possibly been drawn up as early as 769), in which he explained "how the subversion of images began." On the death of the caliph ᶜUmar II (717–20), Yazīd II (720–24), "a man of unstable and frivolous mind, succeeded him. There lived a certain man at Tiberias, a ringleader of the lawless Jews, a magician and fortune-teller, an instrument of soul-destroying demons, whose name was Tessarakontapechys ["forty cubits high"], a bitter enemy

of the Church of God." This individual approached the caliph prophesying:

"You will remain thirty years in your kingship if you follow my advice." That foolish tyrant, yearning for a long life (for he was self indulgent and dissolute) answered: "Whatever you say, I am ready to do, and, if I attain my desire, I will repay you with highest honors." Then the Jewish magician said to him: "Order immediately, without any delay or postponement, that an encyclical letter be issued throughout your empire to the effect that every representational painting, whether on tablets or wall-mosaics, on sacred vessels or on altar carvings, and all such objects as are found in Christian churches, be destroyed and thoroughly abolished, nay also representations of all kinds that adorn and embellish the market places of cities." And moved by satanic wickedness, the false prophet added: "every likeness," contriving thereby to make unsuspected his hostility against us.

The wretched tyrant, yielding most readily to this advice, sent [officials] and destroyed the holy icons and all other representations in every province under his rule, and, because of the Jewish magician, thus ruthlessly robbed the churches of God under his sway of all monuments, before the evil came into this land [i.e., the Byzantine Empire]. As the God-loving Christians fled, lest they should have to overthrow the holy images with their own hands, the emirs who were sent for this purpose pressed into service abominable Jews and wretched Arabs; and thus they burned the venerable icons, and either smeared or scraped the ecclesiastical buildings.

On hearing this, the pseudo-bishop of Nakolia and his followers imitated the lawless Jews and impious Arabs, outraging the churches of God. . . . When, after doing this, the Caliph Yazīd died, no more than two and a half years later, and went into the everlasting fire, the images were restored to their original position and honor. His son Walīd [the text ought to read: his brother and successor Hishām (724–743)], filled with indignation, ordered the magician to be ignominiously put to death for his father's [ought to read: brother's] murder, as just punishment for his false prophecy.[1]

What this passage implies, the historian Theophanes states clearly. In 725, the "Saracen-minded" [*Sarakēnophrōn*][2] emperor Leo III (717–41) under the influence of one Bēsēr, an apostate from Christianity who, on being captured by the Byzantines, reverted to his original faith, came out against image worship, which he banned by edict in

[1] A. A. Vasiliev, "The Iconoclastic Edict of the Caliph Yazīd II, A.D. 721," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, IX–X (1956), 28–30. E. Tyan, *Institutions du droit public musulman* (Paris, 1954–57), I, 466, reports on the authority of Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 1469) Yazīd's order to destroy the idols and other statues in Egypt; it is interesting in this context that the famous physician and traveler ʿAbdallaṭīf (d. 1228) condemns Qaraja, who governed Alexandria for Saladin for destroying ancient columns with a view to using them in harbor works (cf. the translation by Silvestre de Sacy, *Relation de l'Égypte* [Paris, 1810], pp. 182–83).

[2] Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig, 1883–85), I, 405^{14}; the epithet does not here refer to Bēsēr as Vasiliev, *op. cit.*, p. 31, n. 18, assumes; it is, however, applied to Bēsēr, *Chronographia*, I, 414^{27}.

726[3] and began to suppress harshly in 730. Thus the iconoclastic movement is clearly identified with trends injected into the life of Byzantine Christianity by Jewish and Muslim models; it is, in fact, depicted as an imitation or extension of an action taken by a Muslim ruler. Spirit and chronology—both seem to justify the explanation of iconoclasm as an effect of Muslim and Jewish influences.[4]

This explanation appears to receive further corroboration when the Byzantine movement is synchronized with that hardening of Muslim antagonism against images which can be traced during the period from ᶜUmar II to the end of the eighth century when, in a significant incident, in 785 a governor of Medina had the human figures erased from a censer which the first ᶜUmar had brought from Syria to perfume the mosque of the Prophet.[5]

The acts of the fourth session of the Nicaean Council (held on October 1) incorporate a letter from the iconophile patriarch Germanos (715–30; d. 733) to John, bishop of Synnada.[6] In this document the patriarch relates that he has had a conversation with the bishop of Nakolia in Phrygia[7]—the same cleric to whom the presbyter John referred as one of the principal instigators of iconoclasm—"in which the latter had expressed his fear that the use of images implied idolatry"[8]—the stock argument of his Muslim and Jewish contemporaries. The Patriarch explained the position of the church which the bishop accepted; but apparently he had not been truly convinced. Another bishop, too, had troubled Germanos with iconoclastic ideas and received a letter defending the cult of the images with various arguments, among them a tactical one: the belief in the infallibility of the church would be endangered if the cult of the images were to be abolished since the enemies could then claim that for centuries the Christians had, in fact, practiced idolatry.[9] Both inci-

[3] *Chronographia*, I, 402.

[4] Thus still G. B. Ladner, "Origin and Significance of the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy," *Mediaeval Studies* (Toronto), II (1940), 127–49, esp. p. 128, n. 6, where further authorities for this point of view are adduced; it is slightly qualified on p. 131.

[5] Cf. K. A. C. Creswell, "The Lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam," *Ars Islamica*, XI–XII (1946), 160. The most recent study of the Muslim attitude to the figural arts is R. Paret, "Textbelege zum islamischen Bilderverbot," *Das Werk des Künstlers: Hubert Schrade zum 60. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart, 1960), pp. 36–48.

[6] Mansi, *Concilia* (Florence, 1767; reprint: Paris, 1902), XIII, 99–106.

[7] The primary responsibility of Constantine of Nakolia for the outbreak of iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire was asserted by Germanos (cf. Mansi, *op. cit.*, XIII, 105*B* and 107*A*; see also Ladner, *op. cit.*, p. 130).

[8] E. J. Martin, *A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy* (London, n.d. [1930]), p. 25.

[9] Mansi, *op. cit.*, XIII, 124*D–E;* cf. also Ladner, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

dents happened before the emperor officially turned against the images; unfortunately it is not possible to date the patriarchal letters precisely; they are, however, in all likelihood later than Yazīd's decree. But the arguments used by the Patriarch and his quotations from earlier Fathers provide a strong indication that the controversy had important antecedents within the church.

Severus b. al-Muqaffaᶜ, an Egyptian Copt who wrote toward the end of the tenth century a history of the Alexandrian Patriarchs, tells that during the reign of the Patriarch Isaac (686–89) the governor of Egypt "ordered the destruction of all the crosses which were in the land of Egypt, even the crosses of gold and silver."[10] To my knowledge this order is the first of its kind; it is in conflict with what one might call standard practice in the dealing of the Muslims with the Christian communities under their control. The action of the Egyptian emir would be most readily understandable if viewed as a response to the intensification of the cult of the cross within the Christian church which is so characteristic for the seventh century. This cult received its formalization through the Eighty-second Canon of the Quinisext Council of 692 which replaced the symbolic representation of Christ as a lamb by his representation in human form, "so that all may understand by means of it the depths of the humiliation of the Word of God, and that we may recall to our memory his conversation in the flesh, his passion and salutary death, and his redemption which was wrought in the whole world."[11] In consequence, crucifixion pictures and the crucifix as objects of veneration became increasingly common.

Evidence of this order would lead one to set aside the concept of unilateral influence. Muslim action as a reaction to internal Christian developments and, more generally, actions within both communities in conformity with shared attitudes and dispositions are observable and these become impediments to too facile an assumption of a flow of ideas in a single direction.

But we may go further. Not only did the theological hostility of the Muslims to images deepen as time went by, not only were the Jews themselves, or at least certain sections of them, rather recent converts to this hostility who down to the sixth century had not hesitated to adorn even their synagogues with pictorial representations,[12] but within the Greek church itself the antagonism to images can be traced long before Islam had emerged. In fact, "an undercurrent of at least

[10] Vasiliev, *op. cit.*, p. 141, n. 50.

[11] Martin, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–21.

[12] The Jewish prohibition goes back to Lev. 26:1; important also are Exod. 20:3 and Deut. 5:8.

potential iconoclasm" runs "through the entire history of the Church."[13]

The Church has been the battlegound of a continuing conflict of pro-iconic and anti-iconic tendencies; the iconoclasm of the eighth and ninth centuries must be viewed as the climax of a movement that had its roots in the spirituality of the Christian concept of the divinity. "But the hour cometh and now is when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). Spiritual worship rejected all material aids—sacrificial victims, shrines, altars, and images. Sacrifice and image were tainted by their use in the pagan cult and the aversion to figural representation was reinforced by the Mosaic prohibition of the graven image. "Decorative and symbolic devices, narrative and didactic images"—these seemed relatively innocuous and were admitted to Christian assembly rooms and cemeteries in the third century. The cult of relics spread and the "*proskynēsis* before the Sign of the Passion was considered a perfectly natural thing for a Christian."[14] Augustine found it necessary to inveigh against *sepulcrorum et picturarum adoratores*[15] and his contemporary, Epiphanius of Salamis (on Cyprus), opposes Christian imagery and states its damages for the faith in the lapidary phrase: "When images are put up the customs of the pagans do the rest."[16] We do not need to accompany the opposition to the images any further beyond noting that it reached a first peak around A.D. 600 as a direct result of the intensification of popular image worship during the age of Justinian (527–65). The Monophysite "heretics," from their belief in the one divine nature of Christ, objected logically to images of the Savior but went beyond this position to oppose "the representation of angels in human form and even the rendering of the Holy Ghost in the shape of a dove."[17] Their views are of especial importance in our context, since their centers early came under Muslim sovereignty and since affinities between their type of Christianity and the message of the Prophet have often been observed. But like the Muslims the Monophysites were not entirely consistent, for we know of instances when a Monophysite population worshiped an image.[18]

The Muslim artist is confronted by a warning. On Judgment Day he will be challenged to breathe life into his figures and on his failure

[13] E. Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, VIII (1954), 85. In 306 the Council of Elvira in Spain prohibited images altogether.

[14] Kitzinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 88–90.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 93.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 131.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

to animate the humans and the animals he has formed he will be consigned to the eternal fire as a blasphemous rival of the one and only Creator. The argument predates Islam. Such early Fathers as Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian condemn the artist as a deceiver; but under the influence of Neo-Platonic thought patterns it became possible in Christianity (but not in Islam) to view the work of the artist as "an extension of the divine act of creation," the lowest rung, as it were, in the descending ladder of the reflections of the divine.[19] The greatest theorist of the iconophiles, the abbot Theodore of Studion (d. 826), insists that the prototype must produce the image which it includes *in potentia*. So the prototype, above all the Christ in his humanity and divinity, is really, although not materially, identical with his image. In contrast, let me recall, the Western church never recognized the possibility of anything on earth being identical with God—neither image nor man. The religious value of the images stems from their character as a *muta praedicatio*, as the *litteratura laicorum*.[20]

Thus an examination of the history of Christianity leaves no doubt that an iconoclastic controversy has been germane and, one might almost claim, necessary to its development and that, to say the least, it would be somewhat rash to put down the conflict of the eighth century to Muslim and Jewish influences as such.[21] Where such influences are likely to have made themselves felt is in the timing of Leo's decree. The attacks on Christianity which were becoming more and more frequent in Muslim circles never failed to give the charge of idolatry through image worship a prominent place. This charge must have struck home especially in eastern Asia Minor, the home of the most important sections of the army with which Leo III rescued the Empire from the great Arab invasion of 715–18, and we know that his anti-iconic measures were as loyally indorsed in Eastern Anatolia as they were bitterly opposed in the Hellenic centers of the western part of the Empire. In other words, the Muslim and the eastern Byzantine populations shared a predisposition of hostility to figural representa-

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

[20] This expression goes back to the twelfth century, the first famous formulation of the idea, to Gregory the Great (cf. Ladner, *op. cit.*, p. 147, n. 116; some of the decisive passages from Theodore's *Antirrhetika* are quoted also, *ibid.*, p. 145, n. 107). The idea occurs already in S. Nilus (d. 430), "Epist. ad Olympiodorum, Epist. 61," *MPG*, LXXIX, 578*D*–579*A*; for the reference, cf. H. Menges, *Die Bilderlehre des hl. Johannes von Damaskus* (Diss. Münster [Kallmünz, 1937], p. 19).

[21] So also Menges, *ibid.*, p. 24, who admits a certain measure of Jewish and Muslim influence (pp. 30–31). Menges offers a sketch of anti-iconic movements within the Church and among "heretics" (pp. 24–30). Our presentation is beholden throughout to the materials set out by A. Grabar, *L'Iconoclasme byzantin. Dossier archéologique* (Paris, 1957), esp. pp. 93–112.

tion in the cult (and, in many instances, even outside the strictly religious sphere). Neither the institution of religious images nor its criticism and, least of all, the theological arguments developed during the iconoclastic crisis are imported from the world of Islam—yet the attitudes that brought it on have been even more potent in shaping Jewish and Muslim religiosity than they have in shaping that of Greek Christianity.

The kinship of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in their basic assumptions has been evident to all observers. Monotheism, the personal god, the linear progress of man through a single and unrepeatable life in history, the eschatological orientation which places him in relative nearness to the end and to the judgment that is to decide over his fate in eternity, the revealed book, the figure of the messenger and prophet—it would serve no useful purpose to continue the list of points of contact between the religions of Near Eastern birth. On the other hand, it is imperative to realize that throughout the Near Eastern area (and to a large extent, in the regions which adopted the three faiths) the holy had, from time immemorial, been experienced through a certain number of religious motifs, some of which have just been enumerated. These motifs are tolerant of considerable elaboration and modification. Monotheism may, by the faithful seeking an understanding of the operation of the divinity, arrive at a trinitarian concept of God which will be as fervently held by some sections of the devout as it will be rejected by others;[22] the messenger may be identified with an aspect of the divinity or separated from it as merely a man chosen for a distinct and definite function; the distance between man and God will everywhere be experienced as a problem but variously conceived of as capable of diminution and overcoming; the central position of man in the universe and the planning of the deity is accepted as an axiom; but the limits of this uniqueness will be differently drawn and both a sense of grandeur and of failure, and even a sense of guilt at this failure, may result from the knowledge that God created man in his image. The history of the three religions could and,

[22] Even within Christianity the concept of the trinity led to serious difficulties. The dyophysite Son of God, *vere homo vere deus*, ran counter to the idea of a divine person as it animated large sections of Christians in the East. The Monophysite emphasis on the divinity of the Christ and the docetic views that were added to this by the Julianists who, in the sixth century, preached not only the incorruptibility of the body of the Christ but also revived the doctrine of earlier heretics that Christ's crucifixion had been but a *phantasía*, an appearance, that may or may not be genetically related to Muḥammad's teaching on this subject (Koran 4:156); the identity of the religious motifs that are at work in both systems is beyond doubt. For a direct derivation of Muḥammad's denial of the Passion of Jesus from the Julianists' denial of the Passion of the God-man, cf. H. Grégoire, "Mahomet et le Monophysisme," *Mélanges Charles Diehl* (Paris, 1930–31), I, 112–19.

I believe, should be written as a history of the religious motifs that are being articulated and lived through as a means to accede to the divine.

From this point of view, the most striking aspect in an examination of the religions in question is the complementary selectivity of the three units in relation to each other and, within each one of them, of their orthodox and "heretical" versions. Two very briefly developed examples will have to suffice as illustrations.

It has long been recognized that the mystery religions of the Hellenistic period propose, by various means, to shrink the abyss between God and man, to enable man to divinize his self in at least one important (and to the period presumably decisive) regard—namely, the attainment of immortality. Christianity, too, holds out the hope of eternal life and especially in the Greek Church the apotheosis of man is felt to be the object of the humanization of (one person of the triune) God in Jesus Christ. Yet the Church soon moved away from the blurring of the dividing line between the human and the divine in enthusiasm and ecstasy. In contrast, Gnosticism makes it the soul's duty and destiny to shed its material prison and regain its ancestral divinity. Awakening to its true nature, the intuitive perception of the realities of creation will lift man beyond his earthly state, effect a transubstantiation while he is still living, and thus there is placed within his reach a very concrete sort of *Vergottung*. Islam arises to hew an abyss between the Creator and his creature. Eternal bliss, but not divinization in any sense and of any hue, is held out to man as ultimate goal and reward. But the divinization of the Gnostic adept lives on throughout the Middle Ages and is resurrected by the "heretics": Katharoi, Joachites, Brethren of the Free Spirit are only a few of the groups that experienced the holy in a motif banned or watered down or explained away by the official Church. The theme, or if you prefer the question, is permanent: where are the limits of man; where the boundary between himself and God? The answers differ, yet are dialectically linked in an eternal up and down of longing and self-knowledge, of self-extension to loss of self, and of restraint through confidence in what is greater than yourself.

Divinization may be achieved by a mediator or through a personal, unaided breakthrough. The *mystes* achieves his aspiration by the magic power of the word of the sacrifice, of knowledge of one kind or another. The Christian is saved through the sacrifice of the mediator; the Gnostic rises to full spirituality on his own—even though the required insight may be offered him through a prophet or a book. Islam insists on the humanity of God's last messenger; he reveals the direc-

tions which man requires for his rescue; he dispenses information but he has no sacramental function, he is not a part of the divinity itself. But the repressed mediator motif rises instantly in the sects: ʿAlī, Ḥusain, countless *imāms* of the Prophet's house, and leaders of a purely personal sacrality are recognized as the intermediaries through whose agency, or merely through whose recognition, the faithful is saved from doubt on earth, from damnation in the life to come. Once again: the theme remains, the treatment varies. And the religious life continues to be stirred and articulated by experiences called forth by the same motifs.

The lasting potency of religious motifs regardless of the dominant theology of the moment is curiously illustrated by the persecutions to which the "dualists" were subjected at all times in the Islamic and the Christian areas and the irresistible attraction which their ideology continued to exert throughout the Middle Ages. The interpretation of the universe as the blending and battleground of two creators struggling for paramountcy by means of their creations—one spiritual and good, the other material and evil—constituted not only a simple solution to the problem of the existence of evil and of sin, but exonerated the "good" creator of any guilt and guile in organizing the world as imperfectly as many would experience it to be. What the Good Creator, the God of the New Testament to the Marcionites, lost in omnipotence he gained in scrutability and, as it were, lucidity of motivation, not to speak of his moral perfection. When it is pointed out that the so-called Manichaean movements in Christianity, from the Paulicians to the Katharoi, represented social as well as religious rebellions and that repression stemmed from the double character of their revolt, it must be noted that the harshness of the Islamic state against the "Manichaean" *zindīq* cannot be explained as a measure of socio-political self-defense. The "Manichaean" circles in Baghdad whom al-Mahdī (775–85) exposed to a kind of inquisition did not speak for a mass of malcontents, and the caliph must have realized that they were in no way endangering his throne. But their dualism (and their relative intellectual maturity in comparison with the scantily developed theology of contemporary Islam) was too effective a religious motif not to evoke a pained and aggressive reaction on the part of those whose sense of the holy was attuned to the contrasting motif of the single Creator God whose very grandeur placed him beyond comprehension and called forth the happiness of complete submission.

So we are forced to conclude that when a Muslim concept appears in Byzantine Christianity it may well have wandered from the *dār al-Islām* into the land of the Rhomaeans; but more often than not, its

appearance is nothing but the resurgence of a religious disposition shared by many of the populations of the Near Eastern area which fights for official acceptance by means of developing an age-old motif contrapuntally to the treatment accorded it by the institutionally dominant religious experience of the moment. Of influence we should speak only when "a solution to a (cultural) problem, a problem, or both, are introduced from outside into a system to which problem and/or solution are not germane."[23]

The analysis of Byzantine iconoclasm which we have attempted has, I trust, demonstrated that in the terms of this definition, it has not been the result of Islamic influence.[24]

[23] G. E. von Grunebaum, "The Problem of Cultural Influence," *Charisteria Orientalia praecipue ad Persiam pertinentia* (Prague, 1956), p. 87.

[24] The differences between Muslim and Byzantine iconoclasm can be brought out in sharper relief when the political intent of the Byzantine movement or at least the motives of the anti-iconic emperors are examined. Ladner (*op. cit.*, esp. pp. 134 ff.) has shown how "iconoclasm was from its beginning an attack upon the visible representation of the *civitas Dei* on this earth." The Incarnation had endowed man with a spiritual liberty which in principle contradicted "any unlimited power of government." The iconoclastic emperors who saw themselves as "Kings and Priests" conceived of their empire as "the material form of Christendom" on earth; "the Church would only be the liturgical function of the empire. Accordingly the supernatural should remain abstract"; only "the imagery of their own imperial world" could be tolerated. One must remember that, e.g., Constantine V (741–75) intensified the worship of the imperial icons while suppressing that of the religious. The iconoclastic movement thus appears as "the climax of the caesaropapistic theory and practice of the State" (*ibid.*, p. 140).