

Reading Icons - East and West

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Introduction

Why did Byzantine and Roman Christianity differ on the question of representation of the human figure in devotional paintings, such as Icons, mosaics and wall paintings? It appears that the West had neither as intense a cult nor the intense Iconoclastic reaction of the 8th - 9th centuries in the Byzantine Empire. While questions about the legitimacy of the portrayal of saints and Jesus were debated in the west, the issues did not generate the kind of passionate argument and need for action that resulted in the Iconoclasm of Constantinople. While a number of political and historical reasons may have contributed to iconoclasm in the 8th century, it will be argued here that the multicultural magical practices of the Eastern Church of the 6th century inspired the iconoclastic reaction in the East, while under the restraining influence of Pope Gregory in the West (d. 604), and the basic needs of the newly converted Germanic peoples kept the theory of images limited to the simpler points of doctrine, narrative, models of ethical behavior and prescriptions for clerical responsibilities.

I will examine the writings of two men that seem to symbolize the thinking of east and west on the question of the veneration of images. Pope Gregory the Great's letter to Serenis of Marseille established Western thinking on the question. While the letter may have been a pragmatic and even disciplinary decision, Gregory had spent 6 years as papal representative in Constantinople and seems likely to have been aware of the more complex issues, as few other western church authorities were. In addition, the writings of Pseudo Dionysius (5th century) established the mystical dimension of Christian theology and art and are frequently referred to by later defenders of image veneration. So it is worthwhile, I think, to examine the source of their ideas directly, and examine some of the implications for image worship.

In addition I will examine some early Icons from the 6th century that survived Iconoclasm at the extremes of the Byzantine world, in Rome, Ravenna and at Mt. Sinai. The design and painting of the icons are different, reflecting a subtly different function of these early paintings, east and west. The various sources of the Icon style that

integrated after Iconoclasm had not yet been clarified. It is still possible to see the sources (Classical Greece, Imperial Rome, Egyptian mummy portraits) and permit identification of possible functions of these proto-Icons.

Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite's writings (late 5th to early 6th century) Christianized the Greek pagan mystery philosophies and were accepted by ecclesiastical authorities for the Greek speaking Eastern church in the 6th century. His ideas were quickly taken up by Iconophile writers. However, copies in Latin translation of his work did not circulate in the west until late Carolingian times, at the time of iconoclasm in the east.¹ Eventually, these writings became influential in the West, too. It was of central importance for Archbishop Suger in the theology of light manifested in the expansion of St Denys in the 12th century. And Marsilio Ficino translated the works for the Medicis in the 15th century. However, the Neo-Platonic ideas were not so significant in the West in the early Middle Ages.

Historical Background of Iconoclasm

The background events of the 6th and 7th centuries were influential in the development of the veneration of Icons in the East. Conditions were different in the West and did not serve to inflame the controversy to the same degree. The years between Justinian I and Iconoclasm seems to have been the key years that the practice of image veneration and its theology clarified itself in the eastern Empire. In the Crisis of the 7th century Constantinople was fighting on two fronts, against the Slavs, Avars, Bulgars in the west and the Persians and Arabs in the East. By the end of the 7th century the Empire had lost Justinian's conquests in the east, Syria, Palestine and Egypt, reducing it by one half. In 626 and 686 Constantinople itself was besieged.

Writing and building came to a halt. Superstition increased dramatically, including black magic. Icons were used as weapons of war. There was an apocalyptic

¹ Louis the Pious received a copy and there were translations by Hilduin, Stanford encyclopedia of Philosophy, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, p 1-19.
<http://Plato,Stanford,edu/entries/pseudo-donysius-areopagite/>

atmosphere, exaggerating the belief in miracle working icons, as well as gross superstition and ecstatic spirituality.² The practice of icon veneration assumed a vital function in everyday life.³ This idolatric practice gradually generated opposition and eventually defense.

Icons and Relics

The texts of the period written by pilgrims to the holy land, historians and authors of Saint's Lives, reveal changes in function, uses and meanings of images.⁴ Individual devotional practices, the belief in magic powers of images, and official use of images to defend cities, and belief in images of miraculous origin are documented.⁵ These *Acheiropoietai* were images made mechanically (prophetic of photography) or miraculously by other than human hands. They overlapped the relic and image categories and showed the magical powers associated with both relics and icons separately in later times.⁶ Icons gradually replaced relics as an object of devotion in the Greek Orthodox Church. They did not have the endless resources of martyrs' relics that Rome was endowed with. While the relic preceded the image, the two continued side by side, with the icon more central in the East, and the relic more central in the west.⁷ This change of emphasis began in the late 6th century. However, the magical power of relics often contained a visual element. The relic was a tool for conjuring up the physical presence of the saint which contains the roots of image worship.⁸ Early images contained an element of contact with a divine person however tenuous, or blessing by a living saint such as a stylite.⁹ The cult of images had detached itself from

² Papaioannou, Kostas, *Byzantine and Russian Painting*. Heron Books Ltd, London, 1965. p 48

³ Kitzinger, E. "The cult of Icons in the Age Before Iconoclasm" *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 8 (1954), p 83-150, p 87

⁴ Kitzinger p 88

⁵ Kitzinger p 96

⁶ Kitzinger p 115

⁷ Kitzinger p 115

⁸ Kitzinger p 116

⁹ Kitzinger p 117

the cult of relics in the 7th century and soon assumed a status analogous to that of the relic.¹⁰

Later Iconoclasts claimed that people should put their reliance on scriptures and biographies of the saints rather than painted images. In the records of the Council of 754 they cited St. John Chrysostom (347-407) saying “we enjoy the presence of the saints in their writings, ...images of their souls.”¹¹ Basil of Caesarea (329-379) was similarly cited “they provide a guide for conduct, together with the biographies.”¹² The ethical theory of images first appeared in this document “the only true image of Christ and of the saints is Man endowed with the Christian virtues.”¹³

The Emperors following Justinian were defeated in wars with barbarian peoples. Half of Justinian’s reconquered Empire was lost. As a result, resistance to popular devotional practices relaxed.¹⁴ The veneration of Emperors’ portraits used candles, incense, and being carried in procession. They were sent to distant provinces to provide the Emperor’s “presence” at state and official functions.¹⁵ This had been the case since the Pagan Roman Empire. The vicarious power of the Imperial portrait to protect the legal rights of the citizen began to be applied to religious portraits without Imperial opposition in the second half of the 6th century.¹⁶ The concept that the Emperor was subordinate to a still higher power in Heaven, not dependent on success in wars and politics, encouraged the cult of images.¹⁷ This concept is recorded in mosaic at San Vitale Ravenna. Justinian saw himself as a human servant of Divine Christ. Later Iconoclastic emperors promoted their own absolute power on earth.¹⁸

¹⁰ Kitzinger p 119

¹¹ Anastos, Milton V., “The ethical theory of Images Formkulated by the Iconoclasts in 754 and 815”.Dumbarton Oaks Papers, 8 (1954), p. 153 - 160. p 154

¹² Anastos p 155

¹³ Anastos p 159

¹⁴ Kitzinger p 120

¹⁵ Kitzinger p 122

¹⁶ Kitzinger p 123

¹⁷ Justinian’s Mosaics at Ravenna Appendix

¹⁸ Kitzinger p 128

Theological Foundations of Icons

A change in the function of religious imagery came into awareness during the sixth and seventh centuries. Ecclesiastical authorities began to work on the problem of a theoretical foundation for the expanding devotional use of imagery. The relationship of image and beholder became transcendent. It became impossible to confine the use of icons to intellectual nourishment or moral education as was done in the West.¹⁹ The image came to be seen as a channel enabling the viewer to approach the Divine, conveying love and respect as had been described in the pagan image worship and Greek philosophy of Plotinus and Plato, as interpreted by Pseudo Dionysius.

The idea that the image could serve as a channel of communication with God was introduced into Christian thought by Pseudo-Dionysius' writings. In his Neo-Platonic mystical interpretation of the world as hierarchies, the human hierarchy is filled with visible symbols. These symbols lead us to meet an unnamed, invisible godhead as pure intellect.²⁰ Dionysius' theory applied to art and was used by clerics to provide a theoretical foundation for the increasing role of images in the Church. Bishop Hypatius of Ephesos described how "each order of the faithful is guided and led to the Divine in its own way,"²¹ eg. the beauty and light in the sanctuaries leads the worshipper to immaterial light. Thus the concepts and language of Pseudo Dionysius were taken up by the defenders of image veneration.

In addition were the ideas of the establishment of a cosmic relationship between image and its prototype. This idea was implicit in Areopagitic thought, just as the believer is led up to God, so God is reflected in gradual descent, even in material objects and images. Genesis 1:27 states that "God created man in his own image."²² This idea of the descent of God's energy to various levels is also found in Gnostic and Jewish mysticism.

¹⁹ Kitzinger p 136

²⁰ Kitzinger p 137

²¹ Kitzinger p 138

²² Kitzinger p 139

Images that demonstrated the Incarnation (Mother and Child) as history came to be seen as a living and perpetual Presence. Thus the Mother of God became a popular private image as Christ Pantocrator was for the more public Church images. “The role of the image ceased to be purely didactic and become sacramental like the Sacrifice of the Mass.”²³ Gradually in the 6th and 7th centuries, magical beliefs and practices showed Christ and the saints acting through their images.²⁴ Christian images became indistinguishable from pagan idols. However they were generally not sculptures. Stories about miracle working icons, like pagan images, substituted divine intervention for primitive magic.²⁵ This act could be seen as pre-ordained in Scripture. The idea that the image was thought to be an abode of the person portrayed is familiar from the cult of the Roman ruler portrait.²⁶ Some thinkers proposed that the saints were present in their image and thus visions could be conjured from them.

The writings about icons before iconoclasm lack the clarity and depth of later works, but the outlines of later arguments appear there.²⁷ The everyday use of religious images was increased, by private persons, clergy and secular authorities, for devotional purposes and specific practical purposes, such as healing and self defense. This led to a breakdown of the distinction between image and its prototype. As they tended to merge, Christian thinking on images developed first to oppose and then to apologise or defend these practices. Two significant developments in this thinking were the preoccupation with the relationship of the image to its prototype rather than to the viewer, and the consequent belief in the image as a vehicle of divine power.²⁸

These new functions of the images generated an intensity of worship, and an even stronger belief in their magical qualities. Furthermore, the artist did not have to educate the viewer, appeal to emotions of piety or compassion, narrate a story or

²³ Kitzinger p 139

²⁴ Kitzinger p 146

²⁵ Kitzinger p 146

²⁶ Kitzinger p 147

²⁷ Kitzinger p 149

²⁸ Kitzinger p 149

convey a message. He only needed to create a timeless and detached image reflecting as in a mirror, the divine or sainted prototype (even channeling divine forces). Painters were holy men, painting in a state of ritual purity and contemplation.²⁹

Practical Implications of Icon Worship

Gregory the Great did not refer to any of these functions of images in his letter to Serenus of Marseille.³⁰ At that time, the cult of idol worship had reached the West. We have surviving examples of Roman Icons, and wall paintings of framed icons, which will be examined later in this paper. See appendix for images. Bishop Serenus of Marseilles is reported to have destroyed or removed images being adored in his churches. It is not reported what these images were like. Art historians propose they were wall paintings of the acts of saints. Yet it is possible they were portraits or narrations of the acts of unauthorized holy persons. It was Marseille and Pope Gregory had declared Mary Magdalene a prostitute, so Serenus may have thought he was doing a good thing in attacking possible images of her cult, which flourished in the area. We have no way of knowing, now, though. In Gregory's time the Lombards had invaded and ruled most of Italy (568) and Francia had not yet been unified under Chlothar II (613). Clovis had begun the unification process but it fell apart when he died in 511.³¹ But in Gregory's time there was not a strong central royal or Imperial government to support his ecclesiastical rulings. He had to take into account both the popular demand for images, and the ecclesiastical concern about idol worship.

The two letters of Pope Gregory clarified the position of the Roman church and expressed what would become the "classic Western attitude," that was opposed to either worship or destruction of images.³² Gregory the Great began to lay the administrative foundations of the Papacy 590-604.³³ There has been much debate among art historians about what exactly Gregory meant, and whether he was referring

²⁹ Blagonadezdin, Icon writing workshop, 2004, oral communication

³⁰ Kitzinger p 132, 134-6

³¹ Collins, Roger, Early Medieval Europe 300 - 1000 St Martin's Press, New York 1991 ch 13

³² Kitzinger p 132

³³ Strayer, Dictionary of the Middle Ages

to wall paintings or icons. Since Icons were made in so many different media at this early age, painted wooden panels, mosaics, wall paintings, enamel and gold and silver artifacts, it is well to define Icons by their function, not their medium. Gregory must have been aware of the different functions of images, the use of Icons as mediators to heavenly consciousness, but he did not address it at this time.

Gregory simply wrote in 599,

“seeing certain people adoring images, (you) broke the images and threw them from the churches. And certainly we praise you for your zeal lest something manufactured be adored, but we judge that you should not have destroyed those images. For a picture is displayed in churches on this account, in order that those who do not know letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they are unable to read in books. Therefore your fraternity should preserve those things and prohibit the people from adoring them, so that persons ignorant of letters may have something whereby they may gather knowledge of the story and the people may by no means sin through adoration of a picture.”³⁴

Bishop Serenus in 599 had destroyed artistic representations in his diocese without consulting Pope Gregory. Gregory responded in terms of simple behaviours, not theological arguments, reminding Serenus of his responsibilities as a Bishop. Serenus charges that this letter from Gregory was forged so Gregory sent a second letter in 600. In part he says,

“... aflame with thoughtless zeal, you destroyed images of holy persons ... that they should not be adored. And certainly we in every way praise the fact that you forbid them to be adored, but we condemn you for having broken them. Say, brother, what priest has ever been heard to have done what you did? You believed that you alone were holy and wise? For it is one thing to adore a picture, another through a picture’s story to learn what must be adored. For what writing offers to those who read it, a picture offers to the ignorant who look at it,

³⁴ Chazelle, Celia M. “Pictures, Books and the Illiterate; Pope Gregory’s letters to serenus of Marseilles.” *Word and Image* 6, p 138-53. 1990. p 139

since in it the ignorant see what they ought to follow, and in it they read ... whence especially for gentiles a picture stands in place of reading. ... thus that should not be broken which has been set in churches not for adoration but only to instruct the minds of the ignorant.³⁵

Pope Gregory goes on to chastise Serenus for alienating the flock, when he should be seeking new converts. He is instructed to call back the alienated people and soothe their minds by allowing images to be made and possessed, yet not allow them to adore them, but to prostrate themselves only to the Holy Trinity. He explains that only God may be “venerated” or worshipped. Chazelle thinks the images are not small portraits, but large narrative works set on church walls. They might be old Testament stories, Saints lives, or other ‘holy persons’. While the viewers can learn more, and remember, and be inspired to good behavior by these holy persons, they also learn that only God may be venerated.

Moreover, Serenus’ actions scandalized the “savage minds” of the gentile peoples, untrained in Latin language and writing. They were limited to sermons, vernacular songs, stories and poetry, and clerical commentary. The illiterate seemed to be different from the adorers of images, Chazelle thinks. Perhaps they were a more literate group in Serenus’ flock, who must be restrained from interfering in the learning of the newly converted.³⁶ Gregory was concerned that the adoration practices of the learned, would encourage imitation without understanding in the practices of the general population, who did not have the philosophical background to understand the higher purposes of such veneration, and thus they might degenerate into magical, rather than mystical practices.

Gregory’s letters, though directed to a specific situation and population in Marseilles, have come to represent a more general attitude of the western church. His simplified response to the issues was not the last words he might have said, but were

³⁵ Chazelle p 140

³⁶ Chazelle p 142

appropriate to the situation. However, Gregory was the first Christian writer on art's relationship to words. He says that "just as a written work may be read by the literate person, a picture may be 'read' by the illiterate."³⁷ Gregory of Nyssa also said that a picture of holy deeds is like a book able to speak, ... even the silent picture speaks on the wall.³⁸ This reminds us that late antiquity readers read out loud, either to an audience or just mumbling to themselves. Thus a literate person reading or telling the stories pictured on the walls would be enough to enable the illiterate to "read" the pictures even when encountering them for the first time. In his "Pastoral Care" Gregory emphasized the importance of preaching to the laity. This would ensure that they learned the skills of visual literacy and could properly interpret the symbols, characters and narratives in the pictures.

Pictures and Texts

The identification of the pictures with texts distinguished the Christian works of art from pagan idols. Pictures and preaching were parallel-- Gregory reminded Serenus of his pastoral duties of preaching and sermons. Clergy were expected to do daily reading and meditation to come to an understanding of hidden, allegorical meanings of the texts they read. Reading of pictures by the illiterate was a parallel activity to inspire them to virtue and the adoration of God.³⁹ Thus the more subtle pictures on the walls could be read on two levels, to build up whatever wisdom the viewer possessed.

If we look at the context of Gregory's' letters it is clear that he used the word *legere* 'to read,' that is to read complex ideas from the images. Herbert Kessler⁴⁰ compares the process of recalling what is already known from images with the complex process of interpreting spiritual doctrine from texts. However, he also points out that the difference between literacy and illiteracy in an oral culture is muted. Thus the audience takes part in a interaction between word and image that might be visual, auditory or mixed. Pictures expanded written accounts, made commentary and gave them validity,

³⁷ Chazelle p 144

³⁸ Chazelle p 145

³⁹ Chazelle p 149

⁴⁰ Kessler "Reading ancient and Medieval Art" *Word and Image*, 5, 1, 1989

while texts or spoken sermons and homilies explained stories and points of interpretation and theology.

We know in art history classes that our texts help us to 'read' the images projected on the walls of our classroom. Those readings and the lectures could equally well be provided only orally in the 7th century. The same educational process would have taken place in early churches, where the preacher stood in front of a painted wall or panel and gave his message. Contemplation of the image later would bring the story to mind, associated feelings and ideas for the pagan converts, and the oral and reading public, parallel to what it does today in lecture halls.

Gregory had spent 6 years in Constantinople so was surely aware of the Eastern devotional and liturgical practices surrounding icons, but claimed no expertise in such matters, declaring he did not know Greek. He may have been familiar on a conversational or translation level, with the early iconoclastic debates and the slowly coalescing defense based on the Christianized Platonism of Pseudo-Dionysius. If so, he may have been one of few western scholars aware of such ideas.

However he took a pragmatic approach, and dealt with the challenge to his authority that Serenus' actions implied, and kept the western theology of images simple, as befitted a land that was working on Christianizing barbarian peoples. By taking the pragmatic approach, as well as disciplining a Bishop who took matters into his own hands, he ignored the Christian mystical practice of the intellectuals. As a result, the mysticism around Icons did not develop in the west as it had in the East. In addition the paintings on the walls of churches did not need to be on movable panels to accommodate liturgical practices and could be painted right on the walls.

Camille describes the problem in the 12th century where most lay people could not construct and converse in Latin, outside specific legal and devotional requirements, perhaps similar to Gregory's Germanic aristocracy. Vernacular reading was discouraged by the church, even if it existed in the 7th century, because it used

degenerate forms of Latin, and broke down barriers between sacred and profane literature, but also it encouraged privatisation of the reading experience.⁴¹ The opposition between the communal performance of the public liturgy and the isolated depravity of individual reading were frowned on in the 14th century, continues Camille. Whether this is relevant to the 7th century Barbarians writing messages in runes, or the semi educated Roman lay people, is not the point. It simply illustrates some of the many different degrees of 'literacy'.

The source of Gregory's ideas is a complex problem asserts Lawrence Duggan.⁴² The fourth century Eastern fathers, Nilus, Basil and Gregory of Nyssa made statements that might have inspired Gregory, in Latin translations or oral reports, while he was in Constantinople. They said that pictures functioned to remind viewers of what they already know, by spoken word. Gregory went one step further by including the written word, so often spoken aloud, in the analogy with pictures.⁴³ Later scholars with few exceptions, quoted Gregory without commentary, even after the Iconoclastic literature became available in Latin in the west.⁴⁴ It is clear that the first translator (Hilduin) did not understand the complex theological issues involved. Gregory lived in an age of oral culture, of reading aloud, with a grey line between hearing and reading. He understood the mentality of his 'illiterate' people, having been 'illiterate' in Greek in Byzantium for six years. So it is possible he could have thought that art could do more than simply remind folk of what they knew from memory. Even people who could read depended on a teacher for interpretation of what they were reading,⁴⁵ just as students still do today when reading primary sources.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Camille, Michael, "Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy." *Art History* 8, 1:26-49, 1985, p 40

⁴² Duggan, Lawrence G. "Was art really the 'book of the illiterate?'" *Word and Image* 5, 3:p 227-251, 1989, p 228

⁴³ Duggan p 228

⁴⁴ Duggan p 230

⁴⁵ Stanford encyclopedia of Philosophy, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, p 1-19

<http://Plato.Stanford.edu/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite/> p 3

⁴⁶ author's experience in Medieval Studies 200 class 2007

However, Gregory believed he could teach non literate people to read the narrative images of Gospel stories, miracle stories and Saint's Lives, through oral sermons and preaching, which he emphasized in his Pastoral Care Manual. The language of symbols and gestures too, may have been familiar to his flock or taught to them. The language of monastic silence, oratory and drama was depicted in art and could be explained without writing. All could come to recognize God's hand emerging from the clouds, the pointing index finger of the classical orator that evokes the sound of the voice, and the attributes of the Saints and Apostles.⁴⁷ There is much art historical debate on this point, but secular and non Christian students are taught to read Christian art images projected on the wall. We use printed pages in place of sermons, but the skill of reading images is still being taught in ways analogous to the missionaries of the 7th century. This is teaching the non-mystical approach to Christianity for the populace, the 'milk' of initiate schools. But there were Christian Mystery schools, or practices taught in monasteries and palaces, and on pilgrimages for the initiates who were dedicated to climbing the ladder or mountain to heaven.

Christian Mystery Schools of Pseudo Dionysius

Gregory's near contemporary in the East, Pseudo-Dionysus the Neo-Platonic mystic apologist for Icons laid the theoretical foundation⁴⁸ drawing on the pagan spiritual thought of Plotinus.⁴⁹ He may be said to be the first to have Christianized the Greek philosophers. Thus his work became approved by the Eastern Church, and continued the influence of the Greek philosophers making the theology of the Orthodox Church different from that of the Roman church. The works were not known in the west until Carolingian times, and more deeply in the twelfth and fifteenth century Renaissances. The writings of Pseudo-Dionysius Christianized the pagan theories of light and images and the inward journey of spiritual ascent. This convenient and respectable source was used by later Christian theologians to fight against heretics, and Iconoclasts.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Camille p 28

⁴⁸ Kitzinger p 137

⁴⁹ Kitzinger p 140

⁵⁰ Kitzinger p 120

In 529 Justinian had closed the Platonic Academy at Athens and deprived pagan Greek philosophers of the right to teach at the University of Constantinople. Pseudo-Dionysius may have been a Syrian student of Proclus (d 485 CE) in Alexandria, where Greek studies continued. His work was among the last of the Classical writers, and was first mentioned by Severus of Antioch in 518 CE, to give an estimate of his time period.⁵¹ In his writing he claims to be Dionysius the Areopagite, converted by St Paul in Athens. This seems to be a rhetorical device to give himself the authority to communicate a tradition. Like the original Dionysius he is an in between figure between the Greek philosophical tradition and the Christian teachings. Later he was conflated with St. Denys, the first, martyred bishop of Paris.

The Works

Pseudo-Dionysius' work is difficult to read because of the elaborate language and references to ancient concepts. It is also difficult to know the order in which to read his four treatises and ten surviving letters though it is clear that they build on each other. "The Divine Names" refers to the multiple attributes of the godhead.⁵² The names form a theology of no specific religious tradition though they appear incidentally in Christian and Jewish scriptures. The names describe the structure of the cosmos. People require the names to be incarnated in visible images, to be able to contemplate them.

In "Mystical Theology" Dionysius describes how, after speaking, reading and comprehending the Names, there follows a divine silence, a darkness, and unknowing. The account of Moses' ascent up Mount Sinai is a metaphor for this practice which cannot be described in words, he says. Dionysius narrates the ascent from the lower sensuous reality through the intelligible intermediate realm to the darkness of union with the godhead. He speaks of Moses' "union" with the invisible, unknowable godhead."⁵³ This theology and its integration into Christian and Jewish thought is illustrated in the

⁵¹ Stanford Encyclopedia p 1

⁵² Stanford Encyclopedia p 3

⁵³ Stanford p 5-6

complex mosaic of the Transfiguration at Mt. Sinai. Pilgrims could reenact the mystery in external action, by climbing the mountain, while monks would participate in an internal contemplation of the mystery.

In the two hierarchical treatises Pseudo-Dionysius describes descent of the Vision of God down through the ranks of beings. The intelligible realm is divided into nine ranks of beings: the seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, powers, authorities, principalities, archangels and angels. The ecclesiastical hierarchy of the earthly realm is divided into eight ranks, hierarchs or bishops, priests, deacons, monks, laity, catechumens, penitents and the demon-possessed. A series of rites of the Christian church proceed from the hierarchs' contemplation of the angels, bridging the higher and lower hierarchies. The images of angels in paintings indicates this bridging of earthly and intelligible realm by the prototype of the image. (See the Mother of God with warrior saints and angels, Image 1 appendix.)

Since the hierarchs are able to contemplate the intelligible realm directly (the angels) they perform rites for the sake of the monks and laity, who haven't the ability for this contemplation. The monks (and ranks below) require a visible trigger -the symbol, to stimulate their contemplation. The deacons purify the catechumens, penitents and possessed by giving them ethical instruction. The priests illuminate the laity who receive the intelligible truth. The hierarchs perfect the monks through contact with the angelic hierarchy. The structure of the church reflects the different roles of the clergy and the laity. The rites have intelligible contemplation as their goal, and reading does not substitute for participation in the communal rites.⁵⁴ Contemplation is public and unites us to each other. It involves prayer and so unites us with God. Bodily actions, 'clothed in scripture' constitute the rites.⁵⁵ If we look at the 6th century icon of the Mother of God, at Sinai with members of the church and angels looking up we see these hierarchies indicated perhaps with Mary and Infant Jesus as direct intercessors in the heavenly hierarchies. (see Appendix)

⁵⁴ Stanford p 6

⁵⁵ Stanford p 7

Dionysius also resolves the puzzle of the unity of God, expressed in the Trinity. He does not write as a Christian walled off from pagan thought, or as if he were a Neo-Platonic in Christian disguise. Instead he provokes and delights in intertextuality at every point.⁵⁶ Dionysius' writing is about practicing forms of theological meditation, not academic knowledge. His writing is a complex or subversive process of reading the encoded insight in created things, so that neither the beauty of the material thing nor the deeper hidden beauty of the sign becomes a trap, an idol, but an activity that opens up an irresistibly beautiful world in and to God.⁵⁷ Since his work is an explanation of interior contemplation practices, it is difficult to read and write about in an academic paper. A later icon illustrates the process of the Sinai monks climbing the ladder following their abbot John Climacus. (Image 9 Appendix)

However, the study of Dionysius' writings prepares the senses for the reception of the love of God in praise and worship. It models the give and take of dialogue between teacher and pupil, in the ranks of the various hierarchies and prayer as the primary form of reverential philosophical thought and receptivity. He describes how we stretch out beyond the knowing and light of the mystical scriptures, to the hidden silence.⁵⁸ It is a form of "divine reading" or meditative, prayerful reading of nature and word, "a receptive openness to the divine workings of God, to clear a path toward that inheritance that awaits us in heaven and to accept our most divine and sacred regeneration." (EH 392a).⁵⁹ People who have practiced Christian contemplation, Jewish mysticism or Buddhist meditation will grasp the implications immediately without further description.

This is an additional dimension of "reading" that neither Gregory nor the art historians address, but is assumed by the Eastern Church for its initiated laity on up the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the West it is not until the mystics of the 12th century and St

⁵⁶ Stanford p 9

⁵⁷ Stanford p 11

⁵⁸ Stanford p 11

⁵⁹ Stanford p 12

Bernard's writing that we run into this kind of 'mystical reading'.⁶⁰ The question of whether lay Christians can "read" pictures in this mystical way seems to be included and assumed in Dionysius description of needing material beauty for contemplation. But it would take much more research and practice to be sure. A look at some Orthodox theologians and art historians will perhaps clarify the issue.

Orthodox Theology or East vs West

John Chrysostom⁶¹ explains that the writings of Dionysius establish a notion of hierarchy in the heavens and the created order. The human person between heaven and earth is in a para-priestly character in relation to the natural world. He raises the concept of the iconic or symbolic dimension of the world and the distinction between divine essence and divine energies. The Eastern Christian Church defined the relationship between God and creation by affirming that creation was charged with divine energy. Thus God embraces the world and the world exists in God. "The wisdom of God is the creative and unitive power in all things."⁶² Wisdom of Solomon 9:1"

There were few such spiritual athletes in Gregory's Rome, focused as the papacy and bishops were on establishing an administrative foundation and teaching newly Christianized pagans and Arians. The Barbarian tribes who had settled Gaul and Italy were fighting among themselves for dominance but did not pose the extreme threat to Rome's existence that was the case in post-Justinian Constantinople. While the besieged monks of Constantinople, and those of Syria, Egypt and Sinai under the Moslems continued to practice the contemplations and made the art that enriched both the spirituality and the art works of the east.

Multicultural Influences of Proto Icons on Popular Religion

Just as Greek art was based on Syrian, Iranian, Babylonian, Jewish, Egyptian themes⁶² so were the popular religious practices based on these local traditions. The east was both more spiritual and more superstitious as devotional practices

⁶⁰ Chrysostom, Hohn, "Christian Orthodoxy" Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, internet

⁶¹ Chrysostom

⁶² Papaioannou, Kostas, byzantine and Russian Painting, Heron Books Limited, London, 1965

developed.⁶³ A unifying theme was Plotinus' antithesis of light vs dark, and the idea of "beauty as an incorporeal light dominating matter." The new image of light meant a new image of soul.⁶⁴ The image of man, 'man with a soul,' appeared in icons and mosaics manifesting an interior spirituality and intensity of expression, rather than the glory of the body of classical art. The liturgical celebration of imperial power, with hierarchical clergies forming and rites modeled on adoration of emperor was employed to unify this diversity.⁶⁵ The effigies of the Emperor were adored like Icons and the ritual of the court profoundly influence the style of the liturgy.⁶⁶

* * * *

Byzantine pre-iconoclastic painting is preserved at Rome, Sinai, in the design of the mosaics of Ravenna and at other outlying points of the Empire.⁶⁷ There were many influences in the development of icons. These pre-iconoclastic religious images have been described as proto-icons as they still show their different sources, and had not yet been synthesized into the Byzantine style.⁶⁸

At Rome the Virgin with Child is preserved at Sancta Maria Nuova (Image 2 Appendix). Painted in encaustic, the Virgin looks at the viewer with large eyes. This is the first surviving image on the theme of the Mother who "shows the way" and guides the believer.⁶⁹ It is a simple devotional image with the Christ Child making a gesture of blessing and holding the scroll of the Word in his other hand. The painting of the relief of the face contrasts with her stylized Eastern features. The portrait is painted in a not too masterful hand, though only the under painting is left, so it is hard to tell how skillfully the finished painting would have been.

⁶³ Papoaniau p 12

⁶⁴ Papoaniau p 12

⁶⁵ Papoaniau p 12

⁶⁶ Papoaniau p 16

⁶⁷ Papoaniau p 20

⁶⁸ Zibawi, Mahmoud The Icon: Its Meaning and history, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1993, p 87

⁶⁹ Zibawi p 89

A somewhat more complex image is found painted on the wall of the 6th century Tomb of Comodilla (Image 3 Appendix). It appears to be a painting of a framed icon of the Virgin and Child surrounded by Sts Felix and Adautus with Comodilla herself keeping company with the Virgin and her saints. The Virgin is enthroned in Imperial style with saints in ancient Roman clothing. The painting style is classical with the addition of large, spiritual eyes and halos. It appears to be a local copy of an early style Byzantine icon by a classically trained Roman tomb painter.⁷⁰

In Rome copies of icons were made, on panel and wall paintings as well as in monumental church paintings, furniture in churches. The personal use of icons is not documented, except in later manuscript paintings. The use of the personal Virgin or enthroned Mother of God images manifests the doctrine of the Incarnation and allows for stories of the Nativity to be related. In addition, the intervention of the Virgin's motherly compassion allows people, especially women, to relate to God in an intimate way in their prayers.

Thus wall art of the west was used somewhat differently from the icons of the east. In the west art was expected to be didactic and narrative first, perhaps devotional secondly. In the west the cult of relics provided the intercession of the saints. However the presence of these few surviving images indicate that Icons and presumably Icon veneration did exist in some form in Rome and the rest of the west. It is possible that these kinds of images could have been among those destroyed by Serenus in Marseille.

In the east, Icons and mosaics followed the practices of earlier Emperor worship, classical paganism and the meditations of the classical philosophers giving additional dimensions to the veneration practices. Examples of the earliest proto-icons existing in the East, are still to be found at St Catherine's Monastery at Mt Sinai, panels and mosaics, enamels, silver, mini mosaics, and manuscript illumination. The liturgical use of the Icon differs from the didactic use of wall paintings in the west, at least as the

⁷⁰ Zibawi

practice is noted by Marcia Kupfer. Narrative wall paintings on church walls were common in Francia and Italy.⁷¹

In the sixth century the eclectic multicultural image crystallized. The Church adapted the realistic portrait image by idealizing it, by 'baptizing' it.⁷² The silver industry of Jerusalem produced oil flagons that establish the iconography for the Visitation, the Nativity, Three Women at the Tomb and the Ascension. Syrian, Sassanid, Hellenist and Roman elements intermingle to form a single language. Sculpture almost disappears and mosaics and painted panels carry the images.

Galavaris describes the 6th century Sinai encaustic Icon of Mary the Mother of God enthroned between two saints, with two angels behind, looking upward toward the Hand of God.(Image 1 Appencix) There are rays of light on Mary's head. Mary is painted in a hieratic posture, with Egyptian influence, and the angels in ancient encaustic brush work using ethereal, classical models. Mary turns away from viewer, her body dematerialized an indication of divinity. Her garments are imperial in style. The Christ child's is infantile in body, with his mature head expressing His dual nature, a characteristic of future icons. The warriors are painted in the stereotypical position of Roman dignitaries, distant and formal. The gilt of halos and crosses and gold hatch-lines of the warriors tunics is also featured in the later icon technique.⁷³ These early Sinai portraits show images of man partaking of divine life, not the common portraits of a person in corruptible flesh.⁷⁴ This pastiche of styles and symbols shows the continuity of Egyptian mummy portrait, Imperial Roman and Hellenistic traditions, and Christian symbolism, not yet integrated. The painting is judged to be a pre-iconoclastic work of Constantinople, perhaps an Imperial gift from Justinian to Sinai in 6th century.

⁷¹ Kupfer, Marcia *Romanesque Wall Painting in Central France*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1993
Introduction

⁷² Zibawi p 87

⁷³ Zibawi p 87

⁷⁴ Zibawi p 89

In addition at Sinai are portraits of Saint Peter (image 4) and a bust of Christ Pantocrator (image 5), and Christ Enthroned (image 6) also showing the different elements of transition. The encaustic portrait of Christ Pantocrator in a niche creates an impression of atmospheric space. The type seems to be associated with the Emperor, used on the coinage of the 6th-7th centuries. It may reflect the icon of Christ at the Chalke gate, destroyed by Iconoclasts. Christ's divine nature is expressed by his eyes which are fixed in a realm of timelessness. Naturalistic details, such as the raised eyebrows, refer to the human nature of Christ. These characteristics persist in later icons of this type. This too may be a gift of Justinian and his court, the work of a great artist.⁷⁵

The 6th century Sinai portrait of St Peter (image 4 Appendix) shows a classical Fayum art painting style, with Imperial dyptych design features. The three roundels of busts of Christ, Virgin and St John are in a pre iconic, stylized imperial art style with a design that resembles a proto-Deesis so popular in later post iconoclastic Byzantine art.

In addition to these painted Icons, are the roughly contemporary mosaics that incorporate more complex theology at Ravenna and Mt Sinai. Justinian's (image 7 Appendix) resolution of the Emperor and Empress's subordinate and mediating position to Christ, fits between the Dionysian structure of the upper and lower hierarchies. Later iconoclastic emperors rejected this view, and claimed to dominate the hierarchy themselves. Fortunately by this time Ravenna had been lost to the Byzantine Empire and the mosaics survived.

The Transfiguration mosaic at Sinai (image 8 Appendix), (often copied in later icons) shows the transfiguration of the human Jesus into God. The different stages of contemplation are represented in the disciples' responses and the images of Moses and Elijah. The hierarchies of the apostles, and the prophets are also represented in the border. Since the monastery is at Mt. Sinai, the very place Moses met God as the burning bush, the monks and the pilgrims each in their own way identify with the level of

⁷⁵ Galavaris p 93

their spiritual development. Each reenacts or contemplates the ascent up Sinai in hopes of having a vision of God, as represented by the Transfiguration mosaic. The pilgrimage to the monastery and seeing the mosaic is a reenactment of the spiritual journey for the lay person. The spiritual athlete may climb the mountain itself, while the more simple may just believe in the “power” of the place that had been known to be “inhabited” by the presence of God -- like a relic.

Summary of the Comparison of East and West

There is not the complex theology of heavenly hierarchies apparent in the western paintings, that is present in the eastern images. Ecclesiastical processions, concrete representations of points of doctrine are illustrated in both, such as the Incarnation in western Virgin and Child images and eastern Imperial Mother of God. The Christ Child holding the scroll of the Word (a reminder of the importance of text even in the image) is also present in both as well as adult heads on infant bodies to represent Christ’s dual nature from birth. These are important assertions of doctrine in times of contest and negotiation among sects. From these images the dogma can be presented to the populace as self evident, and oral or textual narratives can be validated by the images. This is seen at Rome and Ravenna and these are the images that we may judge Pope Gregory and Severus in contention about. The stories of the Nativity, Old Testament typologies and Saints’ Lives may have been illustrated both on panels, church furniture and church walls.

But at the Sinai monastery of St. Catherine, the more complex theology of Pseudo-Dionysian hierarchies can also be discerned even as early as the 6th century. The general practice of these initiated contemplation mysteries, that accompanied the abuses of icon magical practices and consequent iconoclasm, among the threatened Emperors of the Iconoclastic periods. It is apparent that icons east and west differed, in appearance and practice. This difference must be included when we consider the differences between east and west in the Iconoclasm controversies.

Conclusion

In summary it is clear that the practices of the Eastern church was multicultural, including the Emperor worship cult, Syrian and Egyptian practices, and Greek philosophical ideas that were absent or less widespread in the 6th century Church of the west. In addition the political crisis of the 7th century eastern Empire accelerated magical practices and a permissive attitude of the Emperors that did not quell the idolatry. This abuse of images inspired an iconoclastic reaction fueled by Emperors attempting to impose their authority. The Islamic armies were victorious over the Byzantine Empire and refugees from the Islam dominated areas undermined the ecclesiastical authority of the Orthodox Church with Iconoclast predictions of God's disfavour of images.

In the west, the use of images was more restrained by the needs of newly converted Germanic peoples, and Pope Gregory's preemptive strike on Serenus of Marseilles' individual iconoclastic acts. His authority stood the test of time. The western theory of images was simpler, limited to points of doctrine, narrative, models of ethical behavior and prescriptions for clerical responsibilities. Times were not quite as interesting in the west, as the Germanic kings jostled for dominance with no real threat to the papacy, and the Merovingian kings following Clovis promised unification and support from time to time, though not in Gregory's period. Moreover, the Plague of Justinian's armies did not affect the west to the same degree. Therefore there was not the intense need for magical intervention for self-defense on an institutional level, and thus not as strong iconoclastic reaction.

Afterword

By the time the Iconophiles had triumphed in Byzantium, the west had still not quite caught up on the issues. Hilduin's translation of Pseudo Dionysius' work for Louis the Pious (son of Charlemagne) was word for word, but lacked understanding of the underlying theology. He did conflate Dionysius, St Paul's convert with the Syrian writer, Pseudo Dionysius, and St. Denys, the first bishop of Paris. This conflation was accepted by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of both Constantinople and the Roman establishment. And much later, Abbot Suger at St. Denys was able to profit from the

icon defense theology in promoting and decorating the wonderful stained glass windows of his pilgrimage church.

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1. Mother of God with Warrior Saints, encaustic panel, 6th century, Mt. Sinai
Evans, Zibawi
2. Virgin and Child of Santa Maria Nuova, 6th century, Rome
Papaioannou, Zibawe
3. Comodilla Tomb, wall painting of an icon 6th century Rome
Zibawe
4. St Peter, encaustic panel, 6th century, Mt Sinai
Galavaris, Zibawe

5. Bust of Christ, encaustic panel, 6th century, Mt Sinai
Galavaris
6. Christ Enthroned, encaustic panel, 6th century, Mt Sinai
Galavaris
7. Justinian and Theodora, Ravenna, San Vitale
detail Papaioannou
8. The Transfiguration, mosaic, 6th century, Mt. Sinai
Galavaris
9. Ladder to Heaven, icon 11th century, Sinai monks attempting to climb the ladder of
heaven, all failing except the abbot, John Climacus.
Evans