John Lowell Rydjord Award*

Volcanoes and Heresies: Historiographical Perspectives on the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy

Erin Doom

INTRODUCTION

"Ever since the dawn of history, when man first became a religious animal and almost simultaneously—give or take a millennium or two—made his first clumsy attempts at adorning the walls of his cave, he has had to face one fundamental question: is art the ally of religion, or its most insidious enemy?"[1] This question, precisely posed by historian John Julius Norwich in his trilogy on the Byzantine Empire, came to the fore in the seventh and eighth centuries during the Byzantine iconoclastic[2] controversy: Are icons the friend or foe of Christianity?

While this controversy may *prima facie* appear to have been simply a debate over the Christian use of art, the debate is in fact much more multi-faceted. In the same way that innumerable explanations have been offered by historians to explain the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, there have also been a wide range of theories promulgated to explain the rise of imperial iconoclastic policy. The controversy has been debated so much that, according to Byzantine historian J.M Hussey, "assessments vary from considering it as the most significant event in Byzantine history to regarding it as of almost only peripheral importance."[3] Likewise, art historian Charles Barber notes that the controversy has been

> cast as a proto-reformation movement, a personal and idiosyncratic imperial policy, an aspect of a massive institutional reform in Byzantium, an atavistic reaction to the growth in the cult of icons, a foreign aberration in the history of orthodoxy, a debate over the place of the holy in society, a reaction to the collapse of the Late Antique order that shaped early Byzantium, an epistemic crisis, and a continuation of the Christological debates in Byzantine theology.[4]

---

[1] John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2001), 354.
[2] The word iconoclasm comes from the Greek words *eikon*, which means icon or image, and *klastes*, which means breaker. Thus an iconoclast is literally one who breaks icons or images.
[3] J.M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1990), 34.
[4] Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 10.

Over thirty years ago Peter Brown, the renowned historian of Late Antiquity, justifiably concluded that "the Iconoclast controversy is in the grip of a crisis of over-explanation."[5] The complexity of determining an ultimate cause to the iconoclastic controversy is compounded even further by the lop-sidedness of available primary sources. The final triumph of the iconophiles (or iconodules[6]) resulted in the destruction of iconoclastic writings, including materials such as imperial decrees, council acts, theological treatises, etc. The only glimpse we have into the iconoclastic perspective comes secondhand from the iconophiles' polemical writings quoting their iconoclastic opponents for the sole purpose of refuting them.[7] Thus, Byzantine historian A.A. Vasiliev notes that because the "surviving sources on iconoclasm . . . are biased by hostility to the movement . . . scholars have differed greatly in their estimate of the iconoclastic period."[8] It is precisely these diverse "estimates," this "over-explanation" of the iconoclastic controversy to which I would like to draw attention. What exactly are some of the theories historians have offered to explain the rise of Byzantine iconoclasm?

GEOLOGY

First, dating back to the ninth century in his *Chronicle of Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284 - 813*, Theophanes the Confessor (a contemporary of the first period of the iconoclastic controversy) offers a geological explanation as the impetus for the imperial iconoclastic policy instituted by Emperor Leo III. According to Theophanes, in the summer of AD 726,

> a vapour as from a fiery furnace boiled up for a few days from the depth of the sea between the islands of Thera and Therasia. As it gradually became thicker and filled with stones because of the heat of the burning fire, all the smoke took on a fiery appearance. Then, on account of the density of the earthy substance, pumice stones as big as hills were thrown up against all of Asia Minor, Lesbos, Abydos,

---

[5] Peter Brown, "A Dark-Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy," *The English Historical Review* 88, No. 346 (1973), eds. J.M. Wallace-Hadrill and J.M. Roberts, 3

[6] Iconodule comes from the Greek words *eikon* (icon) and *doulos* (servant/slave), meaning "a servant of icons."

[7] A.A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire 324 – 1453*, Vol. 1, 2d Eng. ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 251: "[T]he decree of the iconoclastic council of 753-754 has been preserved in the acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, though perhaps not in its complete original form. The decree of the council of 815 has been discovered in one of the treatises of Patriarch Nicephorus, while numerous fragments of iconoclastic literature are found in the polemic and theological treatises of the antagonists of the movement." Note also Hussey, 36: "the legendary embroidery in iconodule literature was already obscuring the motives and influences behind the controversy . . . Added to this, the comparative paucity of sources and the survival of iconoclast material only in an iconophile setting must inevitably increase the difficulties of fair appraisal." See also Stephen Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm During the Reign of Leo III with Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources* 346, Subsidia Tomus 41 (Louvain: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1973), iv: Gero attempts to balance the picture by focusing upon more obscure Armenian, Georgian, Syriac, and Arabic (Christian and Muslim) sources.

[8] Ibid., 251.

and coastal Macedonia, so that the entire surface of that sea was filled with floating pumice.[9]

Frustrated and perplexed by the persistent problems of the Empire (e.g. military losses to the Arabs, famines, disease, earthquakes and volcanoes) prior to this eruption, Leo III had already been trying to find a cause for God's wrath. After several failed attempts to appease God (e.g. forced baptism of Byzantine Jews and Montanists in AD 722 and the promulgation of the Greek law code *Ecloga* which enforced Biblical morality) and yet another catastrophe, according to the chronicler Theophanes, Leo concluded that "God was angry because the Byzantines prayed before icons of Christ and the saints, which seemed to violate the Mosaic commandment against worshipping images."[10] Hence, this volcano was a sign from God to the Emperor Leo and assuming "that God's wrath was in his favour instead of being directed against him, he stirred up a more ruthless war on the holy and venerable icons."[11] Thus, in the eyes of Theophanes (obviously an iconophile himself), the Byzantine Emperor believed that God was displaying his wrath against the widespread "idolatry" of icon "worship" throughout the Empire, and the responsibility had fallen upon him to remedy this problem. However, despite the fact Theophanes attributes the ultimate cause of the outbreak of iconoclasm to a volcanic eruption, this geological explosion would be a moot point if the Emperor was not indeed religiously minded. Hence, Theophanes' volcanic explanation leads to a second frequently cited explanation for the iconoclastic controversy.

RELIGIOUS REFORM

Sincere religious conviction on the part of the iconoclastic emperors, particularly Leo III, has also been suggested by historians (and implied by Theophanes) as an explanation for the initiation of iconoclastic policies. Paul Lemerle, in *A History of Byzantium*, claims that iconoclasm had religious roots for its rise (alongside political roots, which will be discussed later).[12] Iconoclastic Byzantine Emperors, according to this view, were merely following their religious convictions. They believed God had called them to reform the Church and purify the faith from "what appeared to them as a superstition close to paganism."[13]

Lemerle notes that the worship of images had not been a part of early Christian worship and yet images eventually came to be accepted by the Church for their didactic and edificatory functions.[14] However, the problem, according to Lemerle, was the

---

[9] Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284 – 813*, trans. with intro. and commentary by Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1997), 559.

[10] Warren Treadgold, *A Concise History of Byzantium* (Houndsmills and New York: Palgrave, 2001), 105.

[11] Ibid., 559.

[12] Paul Lemerle, *A History of Byzantium*, trans. Antony Matthew (New York: Walker and Company, 1964), 83.

[13] Ibid.

[14] See also discussion of the heritage of iconoclastic thought dating back to early Christianity connected to Origenism in John Meyendorff, "The Heritage of Hellenic Spiritualism" in *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends & Doctrinal Themes*, 2d ed. with revisions (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), 43, and Romilly Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries AD 610 – 1071*, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 18 (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 76 ff.

extreme evolution of the use of these images: "images were no longer seen as symbols, but rather the sanctity and miraculous power of the persons depicted were also attributed to their representations, and these were offered personal worship."[15] Hence, the problem the iconoclasts' fought against, concludes Lemerle, was not so much icons *per se*, but rather "the abuses that this idolatry entailed, and against other similar excesses."[16] Vasiliev also cites the Frenchman Lombard as an ally of this view. According to Lombard, iconoclasm was a religious reform movement "aimed to arrest 'the progress of the revival of paganism' in the form of excessive image-worship, and 'restore Christianity to its original purity.'"[17]

Christoph Schonborn, likewise, attributes the iconoclastic controversy to authentic religious reform on the part of the Emperors. Schonborn, claiming to take the motives articulated by the iconoclasts seriously, and thus determined to allow them to speak for themselves, concludes, "If we read the documents of the period, one fact stands out: Emperor Leo III, the undoubted initiator of the iconoclast movement, declared that he wished to carry out a *religious* reform. Leo wanted to purify the Church, to rid it of idols, that is, of religious images and their veneration."[18] Schonborn goes on to demonstrate his view by pointing out the symbolic act that Leo III chose to initiate his iconoclastic policy.

In 726, Leo III ordered the removal and destruction of the icon of Christ over the Chalke gate of the imperial palace (a symbol of the protection of Christ over the emperor and thus the empire) and the installation of a cross in its place (a symbol of Christ and triumph).[19] According to Schonborn, "This double gesture shows us Leo III's intentions:

---

[15] Lemerle, 83.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Vasiliev, 253.

[18] Christoph Schonborn, "Theological Presuppositions of the Image Controversy" in *Icons: Windows on Eternity—Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, Comp. by Gennadios Limouris (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 87. Schonborn goes on to articulate his changing views on historiography and particularly the way he receives and interprets primary sources: "Now it is an odd characteristic of historiography that it almost always looks for *unavowed* motives supposed to be hidden behind those that are expressed. It will be said, for example, that in reality the Emperor had political, economic, military or some other kind of motives and that the religious motive was merely a pious pretext. I do not agree with that method, common as it is nowadays, because of the claim it makes to understand history better than its protagonists. It claims a superior viewpoint from which it can judge the course of history by revealing the 'true' motives which are supposed to have remained as it were 'repressed' in the unavowable unconscious of the people of that period. Instead of that almost 'psychoanalytical' attitude of the historian, I am increasingly conscious of the need for a different approach to history, less suspicious, less critical even. To put it very simply, what our sources say must be taken seriously; witnesses must be believed. First and foremost we must start from the hypothesis that they are telling the truth or at least that they regard what they are saying to be the truth." Romilly Jenkins expresses similar sentiments in *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries AD 610 – 1071*, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 18, (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 76: "Perhaps on the whole it is best to go back to things as they were and as our sources depict them; and to trace what the men of those times thought significant, rather than what we, in our enlightened days, imagine they must have meant by their expressions of belief."

[19] For an eyewitness description of the Chalke gate, the main gateway to the imperial palace which had been destroyed by a mob during the Nika riots and rebuilt by Justinian, see Procopius, *Buildings*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, 5th rev. reprint, Loeb Classical Library ed. (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), I.x, pp. 85, 87. Additionally, Andrew Louth notes in his seminal work *St. John Damascene* that Marie-France Auzepy in "La Destruction de l'icone du Christ de la Chalce par Leon III: propogande ou realite?", *Byzantium*, 60, 445-92, has called into question the assumption that an icon of Christ was over the Chalke in 726.

to free the empire from the sin of idolatry and to place it once more under the victorious symbol of Christ, the sign under which the great Constantine had triumphed: *in hoc signo vinces!*[20]

RELIGIOUS CULTURAL CONFLICT

Greek Christians vs. Oriental Syrians and Armenians

Theologian and historian John Meyendorff suggests that a conflict between two distinct religious cultures also contributed to the rise of the iconoclastic controversy. According to Meyendorff, "From their pagan past, Greek-speaking Christians had inherited a taste for religious imagery," while, on the other hand, "Eastern Christians, particularly the Syrians and the Armenians, were much less inclined by their cultural past to the use of images."[21] Meyendorff concludes this idea by noting the significance of the Armenian or Isaurian origins of the iconoclastic emperors, thereby linking the iconoclastic policies of these emperors to their Eastern background. Vasiliev concurs with Meyendorff, noting that all of the iconoclastic emperors were of eastern descent (Leo III was Isaurian / Syrian, Leo V was Armenian, and Michael II and his son Theophilus were born in Phrygia of Asia Minor), and concludes that the birth place of the iconoclastic rulers "cannot be viewed as accidental."[22]

But if these emperors' oriental background helped shape their iconoclastic policies, what were the specific factors influencing them? George Ostrogorsky, in his masterful *History of the Byzantine State*, points the way suggesting that the iconoclastic controversy resulted from a lively interaction between old surviving Christological heresies and non-Christian religions like Judaism and Islam.[23]

Judaism and Islam

During the seventh-century military onslaughts by the Arabs, the Near East was in the process of being transformed into an Islamic world. After Palestine, Syria and Egypt were finally conquered, the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic world found themselves in continual military and ideological battle.[24] With strong ties between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, including many common scriptures (e.g. God is one and thus accusations of polytheism leveled against Christianity by Jews and Muslims), and particularly God's command to make no idols or graven images (Ex. 20:4 – 6), the Islamic world came into sharp conflict with the Byzantine world where imagery and icons had taken on an important role in Christian worship and piety. Thus, these eighth-century eastern-born emperors were merely responding to the charge of idolatry, seeking

[20] Ibid., 88.
[21] Meyendorff, 42.
[22] Vasiliev, 254.
[23] George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, trans. Joan Hussey, rev. ed. (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 161.
[24] Meyendorff, 42.

in Meyendorff's words, "to purify Christianity to enable it better to withstand the challenge of Islam."[25]

Monophysites, Monothelites & Manichaeans

The origins of iconoclasm have also been linked to the Monophysite (Christ has one nature, overemphasizing the divine nature), Monothelite (Christ has one will, over-emphasizing the divine will), and Manichaean (purely spiritual and thus disdainful of material world; sometimes known by other names in the Middle Ages such as Paulicians, Bogomils, et al.) heresies. Paul J. Alexander points out in his work on Patriarch Nicephorus that "christological systems emphasizing the divine nature of Christ at the expense of His human nature were apt to lead to the rejection of religious images."[26] Thus, the Monophysites, Monothelites and Manichaeans of the orient (e.g. Syrian and Palestine) tended to reject the icon, due to its material nature and emphasis upon the humanity of Christ (both nature and will).

By the eighth century the non-Greek speaking East was mostly Monophysite.[27] Thus the iconoclastic emperors of Syrian/Armenian descent would have grown up in a Monophysite atmosphere and would have been familiar, if not sympathetic, to its points. Ostrogorsky points back to the Byzantine reign of Philippicus-Barbanes with his Monophysite and Monothelite tendencies as a foreshadowing of the iconoclastic controversy, for it was Philippicus who revived the Christological disputes once again after the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451).[28]

POLITICAL

The dynamic growth of monks and monasteries in the Byzantine Empire naturally led to growing wealth and power, so much so that the monks essentially became a state within a state.[29] Conscious and nervous of their growing power, the iconoclastic emperors attempted to force them to "disperse and secularize their property," ultimately leading to a conflict between the monks and the emperors, a classic example of the tension between Church and State.[30] But some monks, determined to assert their authority as much as possible and despite phases of iconoclastic persecution, refused to grant the emperor the right to make doctrinal decisions.[31] Nevertheless, ultimately

---

[25] Ibid., 43.

[26] Paul J. Alexander, *The Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople: Ecclesiastical Policy and Image Worship in the Byzantine Empire*, special ed. for Sandpiper Books Ltd. (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 2001), 44.

[27] Ibid., 42.

[28] Ostrogorsky, 152 – 153.

[29] Lemerle, 84.

[30] Ibid., 84.

[31] John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), II.12, 68: "It is not for emperors to legislate for the Church. For look what the divine apostle says: 'And God has appointed in the Church first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints,' – he did not say emperors – and again 'Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account.'"

nothing much changed, for the monks eventually received their privileges back and the emperors retained their powers.

PETER BROWN: RESPONSE & TRANSFORMATION

Peter Brown, the renowned historian of late antiquity, systematically and single-handedly demolishes all of the standard explanations for the rise of iconoclasm in his article *"A Dark Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy."* He notes that "[c]areful study of Byzantine-Arab relations in the eighth century; a re-examination of the Muslim attitude to images in the same century; re-assessment of the position of the Jews in the Byzantine empire—these converging studies have led to the greatest caution in invoking the influence of any non-Christian culture in the genesis of the Iconoclast movement."[32] According to Brown, the iconoclastic controversy was instead a dilemma over the position of the holy in the Byzantine world.[33] Factoring into this debate, however, were many underlying issues,[34] including: demoralization of the Byzantine world following seventh century Arab raids;[35] Byzantine determination to remove and punish "the root sin of the human race, the deep stain of the error of idolatry;"[36] the ability of the iconoclasts to "verbalize their anxiety" by "stat[ing] their case with such irrefutable clarity;"[37] "[s]avage disillusionment and contempt for failed gods;"[38] the ending of the ancient world in Asia Minor and with it the weakening of the icon due to seventh century Arab invasions;[39] and finally the replacement of these weakened icons by the sign of the cross "with its unbroken association with victory over four centuries . . . a more ancient and compact symbol than any Christ-icon could be."[40] Concurring with many of Brown's points, Andrew Louth, noted Byzantine/Patristic scholar, concludes that iconoclasm

> can be seen as the last of the religious reactions to the loss of the eastern provinces in the early seventh century . . . iconoclasm is one of a number of measures by which the Byzantines responded to the spectre of defeat, measures that swept away much of the administration and military system they had inherited from the Roman Empire, to replace it with a centralized bureaucracy, permanently located in the capital city, Constantinople, combined with the organization of the rest of the Empire into areas known as 'themes', governed by a military commander.[41]

---

[32] Peter Brown, "A Dark-Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy," in *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 87, eds. J.M. Wallace-Hadrill and J.M. Roberts, 1-2.

[33] Ibid., 5.

[34] Ibid., 34.

[35] Ibid., 23.

[36] Ibid., 24 - 25.

[37] Ibid., 25.

[38] Ibid., 25 – 26.

[39] Ibid., 26.

[40] Ibid., 27.

[41] Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 193 – 194.

Thus, according to both Brown and Louth, the iconoclastic controversy was a response to a number of factors, both internal and external, that led to a complete transformation of Byzantine society.

CONCLUSION

Just as one should not single out a single cause for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, neither should one oversimplify the iconoclastic controversy by singling out one ultimate cause. The number of theories and explanations prompted by the iconoclastic controversy, according to art historian Hans Belting, does not "allow for any monocausal explanation."[42] Instead, one must take into consideration a multitude of factors, all simultaneously contributing to this historical phenomenon.[43] Hans Beltin, in his magisterial history of the image, sums up the numerous iconoclastic explanations when he suggests that the controversial issue of images was often times merely a

> surface issue for deeper conflicts existing between church and state, center and provinces, central and marginal groups in Eastern society. The court and the army struggled against the monks along a constantly shifting front. Heretical movements joined the fray . . . Economic factors also influence both the outbreak and the course of the conflict. Finally, the military, which always supports the winning party, was involved in the events from the start.[44]

While factors as diverse as volcanoes and heresies have been articulated by scholars as explanations for the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy, a synthetic panoramic picture provides a better clue to the origins of this debate over the question of whether or not icons are a friend or foe of Christianity.

---

[42] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 146.

[43] Christoph Shonborn concurs with this opinion in his article "Theological Presuppositions of the Image Controversy" in Gennadios Limouris, comp., *Icons: Windows on Eternity - Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), p. 87: "There has been a lot of discussion about the motives of this violent movement which appeared quite suddenly in 726. We must be on our guard against any attempt to explain it by a single cause. History is always a complex fabric, the weave of which is not 'explained' when a single thread is picked out."

[44] Belting, 146.