

Iconoclasm and Religious Reformation
in the Byzantine World



A
STORM
OF
IMAGES

PHILIP JENKINS

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Philip Jenkins

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Waco, Texas 76798

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Book design by Kasey McBeath

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jenkins, Philip, 1952- author.

Title: A storm of images : iconoclasm and religious reformation in the Byzantine world / Philip Jenkins.

Description: Waco : Baylor University Press, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Surveys the iconoclastic controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries, describing the events and controversies and analyzing the polemic, while also exploring the theological issues raised"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023006192 (print) | LCCN 2023006193 (ebook) | ISBN 9781481318228 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781481318242 (pdf) | ISBN 9781481318259 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Iconoclasm--Byzantine Empire. | Icons, Byzantine. | Byzantine Empire--Church history.

Classification: LCC BR238 .J46 2023 (print) | LCC BR238 (ebook) | DDC 246/.5309495--dc23/eng/20230622

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023006192>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023006193>

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Note on Usage

Writing this book has required quite a few decisions about usage and spelling. Generally, I have followed English usage in cases where people and places are known in a standard form, so that I speak for instance of the empress as Irene rather than the more technically correct Eirene, and use Constantine rather than Latin *Constantinus* or Greek *Konstantinos*. I refer to the cities of Constantinople, Athens, and Ephesus, rather than to the Greek forms. In other cases, where names are less thoroughly domesticated in an English setting, I use Greek forms in preference to Latinizations. Hence, I refer to Germanos, Tarasios, and Theophilos rather than to Germanus, Tarasius, and Theophilus.

The setting for the book's action also requires some discussion. Historians commonly speak of the empire of the eighth and ninth centuries as "Byzantine," which is a perfectly correct usage in the context. Yet the word has somewhat disreputable connotations in English, suggesting as it does overelaborate or needlessly complicated. It suggests almost a willful remoteness or obscurity, a historical byway, not unlike "Ruritanian." Also, to speak of "Byzantine" undermines the very substantial continuities from the Later Roman Empire. "Byzantine" people in 700 or 800 called themselves Roman, lived in the Roman Empire, and spoke the Roman tongue, which was Greek. Writers sometimes described their realm as "Romania." When the remnants of the empire fell to the Ottomans in 1453, the new Islamic ruler, Mehmed, claimed the title of *Qayser-i Rûm*, emperor of Rome. The conquered Greek Christians became known as the Roman *millet* or nation. Only in the sixteenth century did West European historians popularize the term "Byzantine

Empire.” Generally, throughout the present book, I will speak of the Roman Empire, rather than the Byzantine.¹

On some specific points, the term “pope” was used for several high dignitaries of the larger church, but in the present book, it will always refer to the head of the Roman church. When used without qualification, the term “patriarch” always refers to the holder of that title in Constantinople, rather than one of the church’s other historic sees.

The “iconoclasm crisis” that forms the main subject of the book involves a number of technical terms, some of which are more loaded than they initially appear. As I will explain in chapter 1, the word “iconoclast” itself suggests the extreme act of “breaking” an image, rather than merely choosing not to use such representations. Supporters of images are variously known as iconodules (devotees of images) or iconophiles (lovers of images). While using all these labels, I will often speak more neutrally of pro- or anti-image partisans, movements, and texts.

The chronological period covered by this book does not fit easily into any of the historical categories that are often employed. It is rather late for the period of “Late Antiquity,” which is usually taken to extend from the third century through the seventh or eighth, depending on the region, and historians often date the start of the Middle Byzantine empire from 717. Having said that, one of my major themes concerns the remarkable persistence into the eighth and ninth centuries of many aspects of the religious thought and cultural worldview of much earlier eras. That includes, for instance, the continued passion over Christological debates, intense efforts to draw and enforce the boundaries separating Christianity from its Jewish origins, the continued significance of quite radical sectarian and heretical Christian movements, and the fascination with charismatic and prophetic holy individuals. I will on occasion speak of the era in question as part of Late Antiquity, as well as “Early Medieval.”

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to my Baylor University colleague Byron Johnson, for his support and encouragement, and also to my terrific friends in the Institute for Studies of Religion. Thanks also to Cade Jarrell of Baylor University Press, with whom I have worked on this project from the outset.

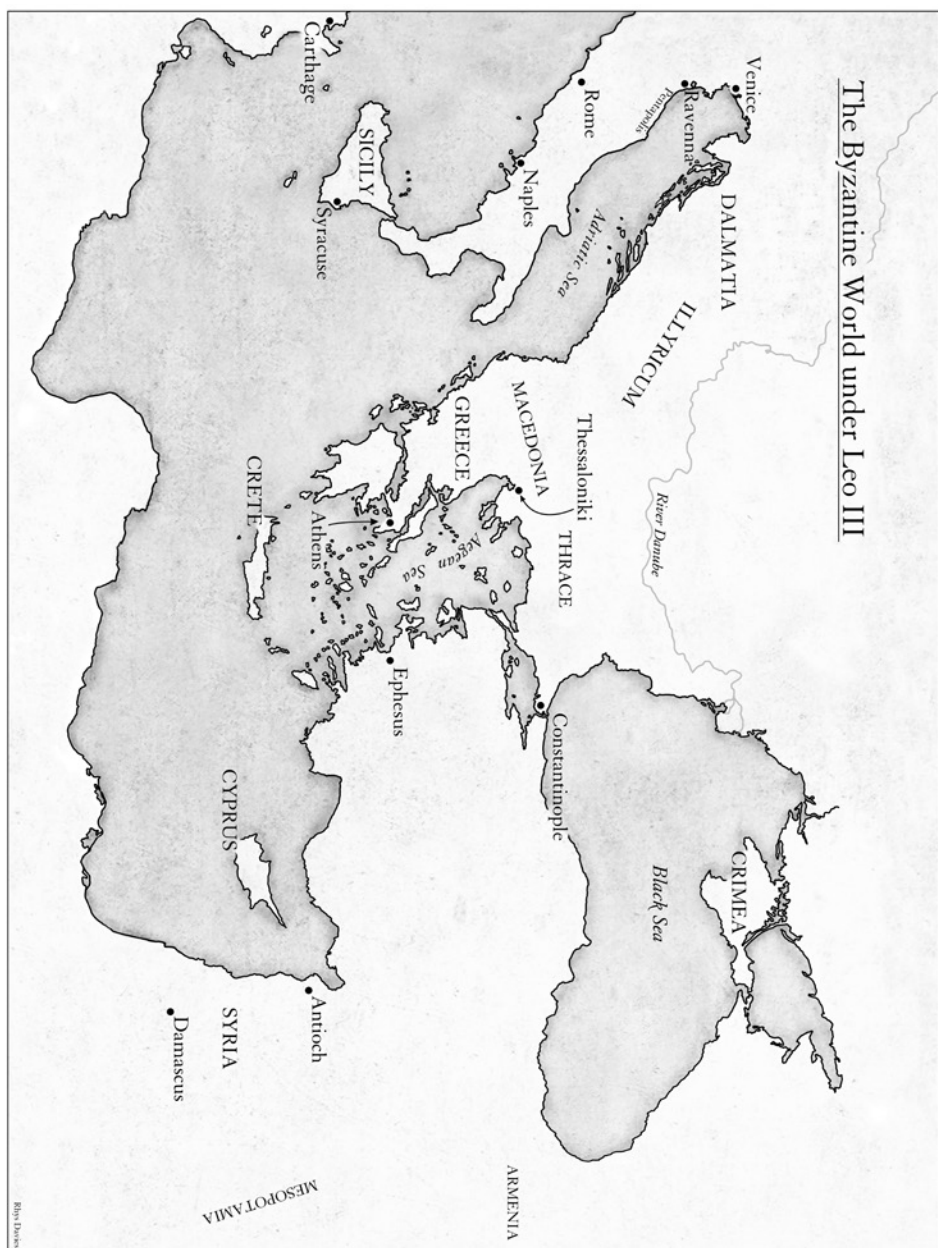
As always, my main thanks are to my wife, Liz Jenkins.

The Heart of the Isaurian Empire





The Byzantine World under Leo III



1

The Image Struggle

Myths and Realities

The Scripture says, “You have not seen the likeness of Him.” What wisdom in the law-giver. How depict the invisible? How picture the inconceivable? How give expression to the limitless, the immeasurable, the invisible? How give a form to immensity? How paint immortality? How localize mystery?

John of Damascus¹

Smashing the Idols

During the early Middle Ages, Christian churches often suffered from turmoil and violence. Wealthy religious houses proved tempting targets for a variety of enemies, from pagan Northmen and Magyars to Muslim Arab raiders, who looted and destroyed sacred objects. In 793 Vikings destroyed the venerable English monastery of Lindisfarne, beginning a sequence of similar raids that took a grievous toll across western Europe over the following century. But at about this time, in the surviving Roman Empire, some acts of destruction and removal were ordered by Christian rulers themselves. The key figures were two emperors, Leo III (717–741) and his son, Constantine V (741–775), who belonged to the powerful Isaurian dynasty.²

In 787 Tarasios, patriarch of Constantinople, lamented the officially sanctioned campaigns that in recent decades had wrought such havoc on the empire’s churches and monasteries. He complained that “by digging out whatever was of mosaic and obliterating all encaustic work in colors

they made indecorous the decorousness of the sacred churches. . . . They consigned to fire panels in commemoration of Christ our God and his saints. . . . They despoiled and ravaged our churches.” After a hiatus, the campaign resumed in the early ninth century. Acting in the name of the state, officials and vigilantes shattered shrines containing relics; they tore sacred garments illustrated with holy figures; they took axes to wooden panels and burned images in public squares. Instead of oil and incense, they smeared relics with cow dung and grease.³

These actions occurred as part of what is called the iconoclast movement, which literally means the breaking or smashing of images. Although often described in the context of icons, the movement ranged much wider than the objects that we today think of in that way: the Greek word *eikon* just signifies “image.” At its most extreme, the anti-image campaign extended to all portrayals of sacred figures, whether in painting, mosaics, murals, or other media, to “sacred vessels and vestments, on walls and panels, in houses and streets.” These were to be removed from churches and public settings, or at least concealed. In their place, churches and monasteries were to rely on austere images of the holy cross. Decoration was to be confined to nonfigurative representations and natural scenes. Where images did survive, stringent steps were to be taken to ensure that they were not treated with any kind of veneration.⁴

The image struggle, the *ikonomachia*, raged from the 720s through the 840s, when images finally triumphed and were restored or, in many instances, introduced. That included an interim period from 787 to 815 when the pro-image cause—that of the iconodules, or image devotees—held power for a generation. If we think of the whole history of the eastern Roman Empire as a period of eleven hundred years, then the image struggle occupied more than a tenth of that time.

That conflict undoubtedly occurred, and its effects were far reaching. During the most intense stages of the struggle, many individuals were persecuted, tortured, or killed in the cause; cities and families were bitterly divided; and religious houses ruined or uprooted. The implications for wider Christian history were far reaching, involving as they did debates over such critical themes as the role of the senses in worship, the representation of holiness in material form, and the distinction between legitimate devotion and impermissible superstition. In cultural terms, the struggle was crucial for relations between East and West—between what in later centuries would respectively become the Catholic and Orthodox portions of the Christian world.

Having said that, the exact nature of the struggle is open to serious debate. For many years, the conflict has been the subject of intense controversy among erudite scholars, a new academic *ikonomachia*. Although historians debate the origins or the interpretation of great phenomena, such as wars or social movements, in most cases they are confident about specific facts and chronologies, that a crucial law or decree was enacted in a given year, or that a vital battle occurred on a certain pivotal date. Very few such matters are agreed upon regarding the image struggle, including so basic a fact as the date of its beginning. Was there a major decree in 726? Or 730? Or did nothing of the kind ever exist? Assuming that such an order was issued, then what was its scope? What, if any, were its effects? When we hear about the acts of violence or persecution associated with the struggle, did they really arise from a conflict over images, or should we look to quite other factors? Our basic ideological labels, including iconoclasm itself, have been challenged quite fundamentally.⁵

As I will suggest, our sources do in fact allow us to resolve these questions with reasonable confidence, while at the same time subverting many long-standing myths about “iconoclasm” and its impact. Indeed, the closer we examine this struggle, the more momentous the issues in contest appear. Likewise, we see even more clearly the parallels to other eras than we might otherwise have done, and above all, we understand the very significant implications for historical understanding, especially for the history of Christianity.

The Heart of the Matter

We are accustomed to a world in which many Christian churches—Roman Catholic and Orthodox, but also some that trace their origins to the Reformation—abound with images. Some of the greatest treasures of our civilization are images of Christ and the Virgin Mary, whether in paint, mosaic, sculpture, textiles, or many other media. Some indeed are icons strictly defined, such as the wonderful work created by generations of artists in Russia and other Orthodox lands. That tradition of figural representation of holy individuals stands in sharp contrast to what we find in Islam or Judaism, which have usually chosen other means of artistic expression. But the image struggle points to a moment when Christianity might have followed a quite different trajectory.

As the iconoclast revival in the ninth century indicates, it was by no means obvious that that cause was inevitably doomed. As an intellectual exercise, let us for the sake of argument accept the most far-reaching

charges about the scope and ambitions of iconoclasm, as well as its effects. Assume that the movement had triumphed and even transformed the whole Christian world, with incalculable consequences for the history of art and devotion. That would have meant a whole religious sensibility very different from what we know of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. We might look at the great Gothic cathedrals of France or Germany and imagine them stripped bare of images and material figures, as actually did occur in Protestant nations like the Netherlands during the Reformation. Lacking such images, how utterly different would be our concept of the medieval era and its culture, its mentalities, its everyday assumptions. Can we even conceive what Orthodoxy would be like if it lacked or forbade that whole apparatus of icons and material symbols of faith? It is difficult to contemplate something so different from historical reality. But at the same time, presumably, if the most extreme iconoclasts had achieved their new religious order, then Christians today would be as horrified by the concept of churches adorned with pictures of holy people as would Jews or Muslims in their respective buildings.⁶

Given their importance, it is surprising that those struggles are not well known to nonspecialist Western church historians, who find the issues at stake so remote from their own concerns. This is partly because these battles are portrayed as confined to the “Byzantine” state, so far from what we image as the later heart of the Catholic (and, by implication, Christian) world. Yet at the time, that eastern empire was the world’s most powerful Christian entity, and the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual heart of the Christian world. The image conflict was a pivotal moment in shaping the beliefs and customs of the Eastern and Orthodox churches, which looked to the Second Council of Nicea in 787 as a critical affirmation of Christian belief, almost as vital as its more famous predecessor had been, back in 325. That eastern Roman world that emerged from the image struggle was the source of the Christian conversion of eastern Europe, including Russia. As recently as the beginning of the twentieth century, the Orthodox churches accounted for almost a third of all Christian believers, and they cherished their icons.⁷

But this debate was in no sense a matter for the Orthodox alone, and not for centuries after the Iconoclast Era would there be any formal distinction between Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic. Second Nicea is the last such general council acknowledged as authoritative by both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox branches of Christianity, as well as by successor bodies like the Anglican Communion and the Lutherans.

Images, Icons, and Idols

To speak of the image struggle in terms of icons seems to confine it to a distinctly eastern spiritual world far removed from “mainstream” Christianity, however we may define that term. In reality, the battle demonstrates clear continuities from the far better-known theological debates of the early Christian centuries and the Great Church. The debates from the 720s onward followed directly from the Christological controversies that we associate with fifth-century councils such as Ephesus and Chalcedon, and the language of those older gatherings frequently surfaces in discussions of holy images. If we seek the conclusion of those famous Christological debates, we should not point to Chalcedon, in 451, but rather to the triumph of (iconodule) orthodoxy some four centuries later. Throughout, the image debate was centrally concerned with the fact of Incarnation.⁸

The issues of the eighth-century crisis were ably summarized by the English lay theologian Charles Williams, who in 1939 described an incident in which imperial forces provoked a riot when they removed a great public image of Christ in Constantinople:

It was asserted that, by such an attack on representations of the Divine Flesh and Its Mother, the Emperor and his friends were denying the Incarnation; it was answered that because of the uniqueness of that Flesh representations were impermissible. “The image is the symbol of Christ,” said St. John Damascene; “the honor paid to the image passes to its prototype,” said St. Basil. “No image can depict the Two Natures,” answered their opponents; “every image is therefore heretical. His only proper representation is in the Eucharist which is He.”⁹

Those eighth-century debates raise fundamental questions about the nature of Christian belief and devotion, and about the relationship between the Old Testament and the New, between Old and New Covenants. All the Abrahamic religions inherit a powerful scriptural prohibition against idolatry, which they have enforced with varying degrees of severity. The Bible’s Second Commandment prohibits any making of graven images or any bowing down to worship such things. The Septuagint Greek translation of “image” in that biblical passage is *eidolon*, which is the origin of the English “idol.” Someone who offers worship, *latreia*, to such an object practices idolatry, a deadly sin. Jews have always taken such a scriptural injunction very seriously, and many Protestants accept that the biblical

commandments apply firmly to Christians. From that point of view, true worship should be image free, or aniconic.

Other Christians object to such an interpretation, on multiple grounds. They might argue that the Bible properly prohibits depictions of pagan deities, but not of Christian figures; or they might assert that this is just another example of an Old Testament law that is no longer binding on Christians, any more than dietary rules or circumcision. Fundamentally, Christians who favor images would utterly deny that they are *worshiping* such things, rather than merely paying them proper respect. The objects are not idols, and believers are not idolaters. Faith can and should be expressed in material form, in the beauty of holiness, and the visual arts have their own rich theology, which does not violate those biblical commandments. The image struggle of the eighth and ninth centuries was pursuing vital debates between Jews and Christians that we might have thought to have been settled several centuries before. Those debates acquired a new urgency in light of the inexorable rise of Islam, which sparked new Jewish-Christian polemics.

Such controversies demand discussion of the proper expression of faith and the deployment of the senses in devotion and worship. How far should external perceptions shape inward realities? If I sit in a conventionally decorated Episcopal church and see figures of saints or Bible scenes in stained glass windows, or statues of Christ and the Virgin, that poses few (or no) theological difficulties for me personally. Some of those figures are intended to be instructive, to teach lessons about the church's theology—for instance, about the resonances between the Old Testament and the New. Others celebrate and commemorate the church's heroes, to encourage emulation and to teach history. Some objects are indeed intended for devotional use, but for most believers, these are in no sense graven images or idols, and what we are doing is not worship. We are praying *through* those figures, not praying *to* them: they are vehicles of devotion, not objects of worship in their own right. In the Septuagint Greek version of the Second Commandment, the verb rendered “bow down” is a future form of *proskyneō*, which imagines the believer kissing (*kyneo*) the ground while prostrating. Pro-image thinkers formulated a vital distinction between *latreia*, or the impermissible worship of images, and *proskynesis*, which implies paying proper respect and veneration, and that contrast was consecrated at Second Nicea.¹⁰

The image struggle forced those who favored images to defend the practices that had grown up in previous centuries. In so doing, scholars

such as John of Damascus (or “Damascene,” as Williams calls him) boldly explored the implications of the Incarnation for the aesthetic dimensions of faith and for the theology of art. As John famously remarked about 730,

Of old, God the incorporeal and uncircumscribed was never depicted. Now, however, when God is seen clothed in flesh, and conversing with men, . . . I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honoring that matter which works my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God.¹¹

Having said this, devotion to sacred objects or images can stray into actual worship, which from a Christian perspective must be prohibited. To quote Charles Williams once more, “The controversy was not only philosophical; it was also psychological. Is there a point at which idolatry tends to begin? a point at which the attention paid to the Person begins to be paid to the Representation, at which fervor begins to aim at the image instead of the idea?” That is still a live question. The basic concepts and divisions of those struggles in the eighth and ninth centuries remain with us today.¹²

Sources and Interpretations

Granted the significance of the image wars, serious obstacles exist to understanding just how those emerged and developed. Just what happened and when? I have mentioned the problems that arise in reading the sources for Byzantine iconoclasm. It is normal for any historical work to sketch the sources on which a work is based and to warn about bias and selective coverage. But even by the standards of the early Middle Ages, the materials available to explore that image struggle are painfully limited in scope and thoroughly slanted in outlook.

Nonspecialists rarely realize just how few sources survive in any detail for many periods of ancient or medieval history. That scarcity is especially true for the eighth and ninth centuries, which in part reflects the economic and cultural decline that befell the Roman world at this time. But also, this was an era when the triumph of either side in an ideological conflict meant seeking out and destroying any and all documents reflecting contrary views. The Roman Empire was never committed to free speech or open discourse, or to preserving dissident opinions, and its church leaders followed secular practice. Both supporters and critics of images were equally to blame in these matters. When the iconoclasts

asserted their power in 754 and again in 815, they ordered the destruction of pro-image texts and tracts. Conversely, in 787, Second Nicea ordered the destruction of all writings in support of iconoclasm, “all the childish devices and mad ravings” written against images. New purges of documents followed when the pro-image party gained its final victory in the 840s. In the age before printing, the volume of documents produced and circulated was sufficiently small that it really was feasible to annihilate the writings of a whole movement. With very few exceptions, all the major writings and sources that survive from this era reflect pro-image positions and viewpoints, while iconoclastic alternatives have largely been extirpated. As a result, our contemporary records for either side for the years between 720 and the 780s are slim indeed.¹³

Just what was lost from the iconoclast side can never be known with any accuracy. It would certainly have included theological tracts, polemics, and correspondence, besides (probably) histories, chronicles, biographies, and saints’ lives. We have some traces of this, in terms of a couple of hagiographies that might, debatably, stem from the anti-image tradition, while some non-Byzantine sources (for instance, in Armenia) preserve more favorable views of the iconoclastic emperors. Iconoclastic views also survive in cryptic apocalyptic tracts. Generally, though, virtually all such potential sources have disappeared. In this instance, the winners not only wrote history, they engaged in a scorched-earth eradication of contrary opinions.¹⁴

The most significant survivor of the anti-image cause is the substantial text of the decision, the *horos*, issued by the iconoclastic Council of Hieria that the emperor Constantine V summoned in 754. That text survives only because it was incorporated into the pro-image Council of Second Nicea a generation later, when it was cited only to be subjected to a scathing point-by-point refutation. One typical passage is introduced with the words “Keeping up their shamelessness, they have the impudence to say . . .” After the words have been read, the commentator continues, “Again, the false accusers repeat the same artifices about the truth, shamelessly contradicting themselves.” If this editorial matter soon becomes wearying, at least the text is preserved. Even then, we have just the *horos*, and not the deliberations, which would have been invaluable. With a similar goal of refutation, some passages of the quite sophisticated theological musings of the emperor Constantine V himself were also preserved, but in very fragmentary form.¹⁵

But even our pro-image materials are very scant. When the Council of Hieria lauded the emperor for his anti-image views in 754, the

assembled fathers proclaimed that “you have banished all idolatry! You have destroyed the heresies of Germanos, George, and Mansur!” These were at the time the three best-known faces of the pro-image cause. Germanos was the patriarch dismissed in 730 for his opposition to anti-image policies, of whom we have many later memories and some surviving writings. “Mansur” refers to John of Damascus, whose writings survive at great length, but only because he was based outside the imperial frontiers, in the Muslim capital. But of George of Cyprus, who at the time was clearly regarded as a prominent and visible supporter of images, virtually nothing is known beyond that condemnation. If he did write something, even if he wrote at enormous length, it has probably not survived—or if it did, we cannot identify it with any confidence. (He *might* have been the author of an obscure tract titled *Nouthesia, or The Warning of the Elder Concerning the Holy Images*.) For better or worse, Constantine really had destroyed the “heresies” of George, whatever they might have been; and George was on the side that ultimately triumphed. The other major source of pro-image writings surviving from that era is papal Rome, which during the image crisis was sliding steadily beyond the imperial orbit. As in the case of John’s Damascus, controversial texts survived only where the writ of the imperial police did not run.¹⁶

Two Patriarchs and Their World

After their cause triumphed, the iconophiles made the cult of images ever more central to the faith of Orthodox Christianity and almost certainly, far more so than it had been before the crisis. They also wrote history in such a way that made the iconoclastic years appear a devastating assault on the core beliefs of the Christian faith. Throughout this book, we will encounter examples of this profound bias, which affects our understanding of even basic matters of fact and chronology.

Until recently, most accounts of “Byzantine iconoclasm” told quite similar stories citing a standard range of incidents and personalities. Overwhelmingly, such accounts draw on a very small number of sources that stemmed from one era much later than the events described and from a lethally partisan political context. When we read about events in the 720s, for instance, which marked a turning point in the whole struggle, we are in large measure seeing them through the eyes of observers writing some eighty years later, as far removed in time as we today are from the Second World War. All our main sources are not only unfailingly iconodule, but they are closely connected to the institution of the Constantinople

patriarchate and the patriarch's narrow circle at the turn of the ninth century. They were written at a particular historical moment and with a specific goal, to address the threat to image devotion as it was reemerging between 805 and 815. Those observers retrojected their grievances and concerns onto those earlier decades.¹⁷

Central to this enterprise were two men, who each in turn served as patriarch, namely Tarasios (who served from 784 to 806) and Nikephoros (806–815). We will encounter both frequently in the present book. The two primates knew each other well: when Tarasios was patriarch, Nikephoros was his protégé. Both resolutely supported and defended the pro-image cause, and Tarasios was the driving force for Second Nicea. That pro-image slant remained the empire's official policy at the time Nikephoros took office twenty years later. This was, however, a deeply troubled time for the empire, which suffered dreadful defeats and successive crises. Many people looked nostalgically to the strong and successful rule of Constantine V some forty years earlier and warmed to his iconoclastic policies. When a new emperor took power in 813, he prohibited images and soon dismissed Nikephoros.¹⁸

This political demarche underlies some of our key surviving writings on the image struggle. Probably in the 780s, Nikephoros himself wrote a concise but precious *Short History* of the seventh and eighth centuries, and he was himself the subject of a lengthy hagiography. But the Constantinople church over which he presided was the source for other key writings, and most of the historic texts that were produced at Second Nicea to document and support the pro-image cause were excavated from the patriarchal library.¹⁹

That same library also supplied texts that were quoted in the *Life of Stephen the Younger*, which is much consulted by historians of the image struggle. Stephen was a vehement opponent of Constantine V, and he was executed in 765, although the *Life* was not written until Nikephoros' time, in 807. At the least, the project must have had patriarchal sanction. That *Life* is so important because of the abundant detail it offers on the 760s, when Constantine V was locked in a deadly struggle with the monasteries. Almost certainly, it was this war over the monasteries that cost Stephen his life, and not the better-known conflict over images. However, the monastic issue did not play so vital a role in religious affairs in Nikephoros' time, and so the *Life* focused sharply on the battle over images and their threatened destruction. That had the effect of turning Stephen into a martyr for the cause of images rather than the

power and wealth of monasteries, so that it distorts the substance of the conflict in those years. This was history designed to be useful at the time of writing.²⁰

Chronicling a Struggle

The world of these two patriarchs also supplies the context for a source that is by far the most important that we have for Roman/Byzantine history during the seventh and eighth centuries. This is the *Chronicle* associated with the name of the monk Theophanes, to which we will often have cause to return. But before it was attached to Theophanes, the whole endeavor had a prehistory. This involved another monk named George, whom Tarasios chose as his *synkellos*, his deputy and presumed successor. George was deeply involved in writing an ambitious history, a *chronographia*, a task to which he devoted himself wholeheartedly from 808, when he was apparently implicated in a conspiracy against the emperor.²¹

When George died about 810, Theophanes continued his work. Although Theophanes was undoubtedly the main author of that *Chronicle*, he was at least using George's notes and materials. The exact contribution of each man is much debated, so that some scholars speak neutrally of the work of "George/Theophanes." Both men were devout iconodules, and Theophanes is remembered as a confessor of the church, who suffered a cruel imprisonment for his beliefs. That stance is obvious throughout the *Chronicle* as we have it, which was mainly written between 810 and 815. That issue conditions the *Chronicle's* perception of history at every point. As we have seen, the memory of Constantine V was a major force driving anti-image activism in these years, and for partisan reasons, it was crucial to paint him in the most hideous colors available. The *Chronicle* would serve as a valuable corrective for "those wretched, arrogant manikins who are now stumbling into the loathsome and evil doctrine of this supreme lawbreaker."²²

Beyond partisan interests, personal factors explain the very hostile accounts that we find of the anti-image cause, and specifically of Constantine V, whom history remembers derisively as Copronymos, the Dung-Named. One name stands out as the probable source for many of the often-quoted stories as they were recorded by Theophanes, and that is Tarasios himself, who had the motive, means, and opportunity to supply the scabrous narrative. Born around 730, Tarasios followed the classic career path of a bureaucrat in the secular administration. Although he at least acquiesced in Constantine's anti-image policies, he later moved strongly to the pro-image side, so that he had much to repent. If indeed he

was a source for the historical passages that survive in Theophanes for the 760s onward, that effort at penitence would help explain their passion and their loathing of the emperor. Nikephoros was too young to recall those years in much detail, but he would assuredly have heard a litany of horrors from his father, who had suffered badly at the hands of that emperor. Like Tarasios, he had personal scores to settle.²³

Understanding these sources raises many questions about how we approach the image struggle, not least how contested and controversial it actually was at the time. The surviving writings give the image issue an absolutely central importance that it might not have had for contemporaries, to the exclusion of other possible motives driving conflict. Our available sources are retroactively over-imaged, and quite powerfully so. While not denying the manifold impacts of the image struggle, we can legitimately ask whether images were indeed so obsessive a concern for the empire over the whole of this lengthy period, at least to the degree that the historians portrayed. Did that issue dominate people's minds over four generations, or was it a matter that was generally regarded as settled for a decade or two, until it flared up at moments of crisis? Was there one prolonged storm, or were there rather many scattered outbreaks?²⁴

Histories and Mythologies

Concerns about the reliability of sources have provoked a thorough reevaluation of the whole concept of that "Iconoclast Era," of the image struggle and its attendant theologies. In 1973 Peter Brown argued that the whole controversy was "in the grip of a crisis of over-explanation," but attempted explanations soon proliferated in even greater abundance. In recent times, the image struggle has attracted the attention of many first-class historians, who have cast a sharp eye on the available sources, and their critiques of older assumptions have been scathing. Paul Speck, for instance, challenged the credentials of virtually every source that purported to tell the story of the eighth-century conflict. At every point, he saw outright invention or forgery, or at least tampering, which certainly extended to most of the earlier sources included in the Acts of the Second Council of Nicea. In his view, the image struggle did not begin under Leo, and very little can be said worthwhile about the movement during that whole century. Other scholars, such as Stephen Gero and Marie-France Auzépy, have been scarcely less sweeping in their critiques, although their conclusions are less radical. Taking these writers together, it is hard to describe their approach except as, well, iconoclastic.²⁵

Such skeptical work was a powerful influence on two notable scholars, Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, who launched a fundamental assault on the whole concept of an iconoclast movement. One of their books in particular, on the sources for the era (2001), is a precious gift to any scholar seeking to teach students about critical historical methodology. No less valuable is their sweeping survey of *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850* (2011). Based on their revised analysis, Brubaker and Haldon offer an utterly different assessment of the larger movement, and especially its chronology. Virtually every aspect of the story is now under skeptical examination, in terms of the breadth of official image breaking, the degree of popular sentiment that it aroused, and the wider consequences for Orthodox Christian faith. Crucially, the authors shift the focus of the whole historical endeavor. Rather than depicting the iconoclasts as aiming to destroy ancient Christian traditions, they instead see the growth of images and icons as a very recent upsurge within the eastern churches. The icon- and image-suffused world that we associate with later Orthodoxy was in large measure a reaction to the iconoclast controversy, rather than a cause of it. If the authors do not actually reject the existence of iconoclasm as such, Brubaker and Haldon offer a radical deconstruction.²⁶

Every point that such scholars make has to be taken very seriously, especially in terms of handling primary sources and documents. But that praise does not necessarily mean agreeing with every argument that they put forward, and other highly qualified experts have differed with them on certain issues. Among other things, the skeptical scholars appear hypercritical in their attitude to sources concerning religious matters, far more so than when they are dealing with secular sources from the same era. Repeatedly, the skeptics suggest that there is no specific or conclusive contemporary evidence for a given fact or claim, or no independent confirmation of a given fact, while they repudiate what seem like plausible later memories and traditions, or more allusive accounts from near the time. This approach is questionable in an era when strictly contemporary sources and documents are often scarce or at best ambiguous. Concepts such as “specific,” “conclusive,” and even “contemporary” can rarely be applied to discussions of any region in a period like the eighth century, or indeed in much of Late Antiquity. This simply is not a period like the European sixteenth century, where the scholar’s main difficulty is sorting through the overabundance of sources of very different types and qualities. As I will argue, we do indeed have enough reliable evidence to

support something like the traditional chronology of the rise of images and the religious veneration they attracted.²⁷

More generally, Occam's Razor forces us to believe that however flawed the traditional account of the image struggle might sometimes be about a given point, there is ample evidence to show that it was reflecting real events, and that the story occurred roughly according to the familiar chronology. All these issues will be addressed in the coming pages, but I here offer one representative example. The traditional story tells how the emperor Leo issued an order or decree against images, whether in 726 or 730, and in the latter year, there was a significant public confrontation with his patriarch, Germanos. All the sources purporting to describe these alleged imperial decisions are later, and, as contemporary scholars would say, they are weak or tendentious. Having said that, multiple independent sources clearly indicate that an attack on images was under way in the empire at this very time, in the form of the records of the western Papacy and also the lengthy polemic of John of Damascus. Even in distant barbarian lands, writers were aware that some conflict was under way, with an attack on images at its heart. *Something* significant happened in or around the late 720s, even if we disagree about the details or the circumstances.

We presently stand in the middle of a vigorous debate over the nature and causation of iconoclasm, and we will often return to these issues and controversies. But if many of the traditional interpretations of events are flawed or inaccurate, that does not undermine the significance of the larger phenomenon. Indeed, the much firmer evidentiary foundation supplied by modern critical scholars allows us to understand the issues at stake far more clearly than hitherto. We can understand why the phenomenon of iconoclasm matters, and why we should seek to know about the movement and its outcome.²⁸

The Image Struggle: Directions in Christian History

No reputable scholar today would tell the story of iconoclasm as a simplistic tale of heroic resistance by orthodox believers against evil heretics seeking to import Islamic or Jewish concepts into the true faith. But beyond being vastly more nuanced, the real story, as best we can reconstruct it, addresses many issues that are of enduring concern to religious believers of many shades and that raise broad historical questions applicable to multiple eras.

The image struggle primarily concerned the nature of religious consciousness and its proper and legitimate expression. Today, when we think

of Christian religious culture in the Middle Ages, we inevitably think of a clerical-dominated world, in which monasteries held enormous power. Devotion was powerfully connected to the sensory environment of all those magnificently illustrated churches and shrines, with their statues and images, some of which were reportedly miraculous. That assemblage of beliefs and practices continued unmolested until the European Reformation, the time of what scholar Eamon Duffy has memorably called “the stripping of the altars.” But for a very large proportion of the Christian world, that “medieval” reality continued long after that. Only in the nineteenth century did Protestants grow from being a small minority of the Christian population worldwide.²⁹

When we think of that “medieval” faith and its very long endurance, then, we might explain it in terms of the rigid suppression of any alternative approaches by the allied forces of church and state. We might even suppose, condescendingly, that those bygone societies simply did not have the intellectual capacities to evolve “higher” and less superstitious forms of faith, which only became possible after the Renaissance. Such ideas, we might assume, were simply not thinkable before those more enlightened ages.

But then, with considerable surprise, we turn to the world of the iconoclasts, who rejected so many aspects of what became the Catholic or Orthodox worldview. If we take the surviving accounts of Constantine V at face value (and all of the statements are controversial to some degree), then in the 760s, he envisaged a world free of monasteries and the despised Black Robes who inhabited them, those men and women who wore what Constantine termed the garb of darkness. The emperor and his adherents favored not only the demolition or removal of images, including some claimed to have supernatural origins, but also a vigorous campaign against monasticism; the secularization of monastic houses and lands, which were instead given to the emperor’s military followers; an attack on monastic celibacy; forcing monks and nuns into the secular life; the confiscation of church treasures; the removal or destruction of saintly relics and a rejection of the cult of relics as such; the prohibition of lay individuals wearing sacred images or tokens; and the severe persecution of monks or clerics who protested the violation of their familiar ways. Constantine mocked the pro-image faction in terms that sound as if they could have come from the Enlightenment, describing devotion to images as “wood-worship” (*xylolatreia*). Although we mainly know such terms from horrified quotations in pro-image sources, they suggest the existence of a daring culture of radical believers who envisaged Christian worship

very differently from what we commonly assume to have been the consensus of the era. Some of these ideas were credited to social elites, who are broadly classified as iconoclast, but there were also sectarian movements that were quite as daring as in their views as the more famous heresies of the early church. We lament the lack of firsthand sources that could tell us more about what those various radicals thought and believed, and how they argued.³⁰

The Image Struggle: Alternative Spiritualities

A number of material remains illustrate how Christianity might have evolved differently if the iconoclasts had triumphed. One of the most famous sites in Christian history is Nicaea, the setting for those two legendary councils, but the city also had a spectacular church edifice. Built in the seventh century, this commemorated the passing of the Virgin Mary from this world, her Sleeping (*Koimesis*). Although that church is now destroyed, excellent photographs record its lost interior and the awe-inspiring figure in its dome. The original image probably depicted the Virgin and Child, but that was removed during the iconoclast period, to be replaced by a huge plain cross—a cross, not a crucifix, as that would have meant depicting Christ. That was uniquely appropriate for the Isaurian rulers, who made the cross a kind of dynastic marker or logo, which recalled the vision of the first Constantine, who had founded the Christian Roman Empire. When images were again permitted, that cross in turn was covered over by a splendid depiction of the standing Mother and Child, which survived until modern times. One of the great churches of Constantinople itself was that of Hagia Eirene (Holy Peace), restored in the 750s after being damaged during the ruinous earthquake of 740. Again, the only image is that of a plain mosaic cross dominating the apse.³¹

That focus on the plain cross would have been the desired norm for most of the empire's great churches in the mid-eighth century and again during the Second Iconoclasm after 815. Under the stark cross, we have to imagine an interior without murals or mosaics depicting human figures, without icons or an icon screen, an iconostasis of the kind that is today so visible in Orthodox churches. Nor would the priest's robes bear holy images as he celebrated the Holy Mysteries. The permissible decoration would have emphasized nonhuman imagery, with landscapes, trees, and animals, very much like the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus built in this era, which is commonly viewed as one of the glories

of Islamic architecture. The *Life of Stephen* complains that by means of such decoration, Constantine turned a great church into “a storehouse of fruit and an aviary.”³²

If we imagine such a bare aniconic interior, with its comprehensively stripped altars, our reaction will depend on our aesthetic tastes and our religious upbringing. The patriarch Nikephoros complained bitterly that the iconoclasts “have built churches that are free of all these representations, without figures and without images and they raise up their suppliant prayers to the unseen and incorporeal God.” Described thus, we might think of that setting as tragic and deprived, or as a laudably bold affirmation of a faith rooted in scripture alone. A modern reader might well approach Nikephoros’ words without realizing that he is being hostile: it almost sounds like he is describing a mighty Enlightenment work, such as London’s St Paul’s Cathedral. What we cannot deny is that the physical environment he portrays points to a kind of spirituality quite different from anything that we might assume to have existed in Christianity between the apostolic age and the sixteenth century.³³

Iconoclasts were asking fascinating and innovative questions. Iconoclasm is so different from anything that we might expect from our conventional stereotypes of medieval Christianity as to require a serious attempt at analysis and explanation.

The Image Struggle: Iconoclasm and Reformation

The Byzantine/Roman image struggle cannot fail to recall later movements and activism in Christian history. I have mentioned the Enlightenment, but the strongest analogies are to the European Reformation of the sixteenth century. Protestant Reformers asserted absolute faith in God through Christ and condemned any intermediary figures. Particularly scorned were any material aids to devotion, whether images or relics: the altars must be stripped. Outbreaks of Protestant image breaking in this era included the *Beeldenstorm*, the Storm of Images, which swept the Netherlands in the 1560s and left the region’s most prominent religious buildings in the bare state in which they have largely remained since. That militancy won the warm approval of the Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, who applauded the destruction of so many idols. Protestant England too produced image breaking on a breathtaking scale. During the Puritan rule of the 1640s, the notorious militant William Dowsing painstakingly recorded every image, statue, and stained glass that he had wrecked in countless parish churches and cathedrals:

In the chancel, as it is called, we took up twenty brazen superstitious inscriptions, *Ora pro nobis* [Pray for us], etc; broke twelve apostles, carved in wood, and cherubims, and a lamb with a cross; and took up four superstitious inscriptions in brass, in the north chancel, . . . broke in pieces the rails, and broke down twenty-two popish pictures of angels and saints.

In the process, Dowsing and his allies destroyed what had been a magnificent vernacular tradition of art and design.³⁴

Such instances can provide illuminating analogies for the Byzantine events. In fact, the apparent parallels are so seductive as to be actively perilous for the historian. Looking at the various kinds of activity pursued by the iconoclastic regime of Constantine V, it is easy to list analogies to the European Reformation, especially the attack on monasticism and relics. Some of the detailed resemblances are striking. In their critique of the cult of saints, iconoclasts of this era allegedly discouraged applying the word “Saint” to those revered individuals. The Greek word is *hagios*, which means “holy”: our word “saint” derives from the Latin *sanctus*, which has the same meaning. And as the Bible tells us, God alone is holy. At every point, this approach sounds uncannily like sixteenth-century Europe. English Puritans stubbornly referred to the biblical author as Paul, rather than Saint Paul, so that London’s cathedral became, curtly, “Paul’s.” John Calvin himself rejected the conclusions of Second Nicea, which he thought idolatrous, and to that extent favored Hieria. Conversely, accounts of the pro-image and pro-monastic resisters who were persecuted under Constantine’s rule must recall the Catholic dissenters of the sixteenth century, who risked their lives to support priests and the old-style Mass. Both sides in the Reformation era were well aware of those analogies and used them for their own rhetorical ends. In 1609 an English Catholic propagandist described the Isaurian emperor Leo III as “the Protestantall Iconoclast.”³⁵

Such comparisons with other eras can be useful in reminding us of the thorough confusion of motives that drove a given regime to act against religious institutions. Theological and economic factors acted closely together, and sheer greed might lead a king to confiscate monastic property, regardless of any specific religious motives. During the English Reformation, for instance, did Henry VIII strike at the monasteries of his day out of Protestant piety or raw greed? Did politics or piety guide the attitude of resisters and martyrs like Sir Thomas More? In the case of Constantine V likewise, it is all but impossible to separate religious and political motives in his actions,