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ICONOCLASM

Assaults against images occur in all cultures. In analysing the various forms of aggression against images, one may want to distinguish between acts of vandalism (including acts of war), pathological or psychotic violence, and destruction or mutilation for reasons of principle (political or religious); but in practice the motives are much less clear and much more difficult to unravel. There is also more of a continuum than may first be apparent between spontaneous acts of individual violence and concerted and organized group hostility. In situations where public or theological motives are adduced for the iconoclastic deed or event, individual psychological motives may well appear to receive a kind of legitimation in the social, legal, theological or philosophical domain. The term 'iconoclasm' is popularly used in a metaphorical sense; it will not be so discussed here. At issue are physical acts against physical images, whether two- or three-dimensional, and sometimes buildings.

The more clearly definable motivations for iconoclasm include the following:

the desire for publicity (as in the *locus classicus* of this motivation, the destruction of the temple of Diana at Ephesus by Erato-stratos, and in any number of psychopathic assaults on images in the twentieth century, where the targets have been exceptionally well known works of art);

the fear of the life inherent in an image (whether because of the imagined conflation of sign and signified, or in the case, as often in the Reformation, of images operated by deceptive mechanical means);

the desire to demonstrate that an image is not a live thing, in the end, but merely dead material;

the belief that an image is pornographic or may be sexually arousing;

the view that too much wealth is invested in a material object, relative to perceived social need;

the sense that an image is too beautiful or too stylish to convey the message it is meant to convey (as in those cases where art and artistry are believed to be too distracting, such as the sixteenth-century polemics against Michelangelo's style);

the desire to draw attention to a felt social or personal injustice;

the need to avenge such an injustice by attacking or destroying a work that is known to be popularly venerated – or one which has become a particularly important local or national symbol (as with the attacks on Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* in Amsterdam, or those on paintings by Dürer in Munich).

Finally, there is the whole gamut of cases where the image or building is taken to be a symbol of an oppressive, hated or overthrown order or individual. This includes those occasions when all images that might recall a deposed regime are removed (as in that of the persistent removal of images in Old Kingdom Egypt and in the great Soviet

iconoclasm of 1989), or where images that stand in one way or another for a suppressed religion are destroyed. It is in such contexts that one can understand those many instances where the pictures and statues of a hated authority have one or another form of violence visited upon them, or on parts of them. In almost all such cases it is not hard to see the plausibility of the rationale. Only in those instances where the assailant believes that he or she has been instructed by God or some other supernatural being or force to attack a work is it difficult to see the possible continuity with normal rational behaviour.

The range of iconoclastic acts is great: they vary from surface defilement to total destruction. Amongst the commonest examples are partial mutilation, as in the removal of sexual organs (in attempts to reduce the putative sexual affectiveness of the image) or of the limbs of unjust judges; or in the removal of those parts of the body – generally the face (the eyes, but often the mouth or nose), or a limb or two – which most betoken the imagined life of the image. The passage from censorship to iconoclasm – and vice versa – is a common one.

IDOLATRY

Perhaps the commonest basis for iconoclasm is the belief that the image must be destroyed, or have its putative power reduced, because it is something other than it ought to be; or that it has powers that it ought not to have; or that it is testimony to skills which are regarded as supernatural. The aim in all such cases is to deny the power of the image.

Amongst the more characteristic of the iconoclastic injunctions is one to be found in Exodus 20. 3–5 (the first or the first and second of the commandments, depending on one's Church), where the injunction, 'thou shalt have no other gods before me ... [nor] bow down thyself to them, nor serve them', is followed by the firm prohibition (sometimes regarded simply as part of the first commandment and sometimes – more rigorously – as the second), 'thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.' Equally typical is the passage in the Islamic hadith, where the artist who has the temerity to create figurative images is summoned, in the next world, before God, and is instructed to breathe life into his creations. Failing to do so (since that ability is reserved only to God), he is cast into outer hell for his effrontery in attempting to enter, by imitation, what is God's province alone – namely, the creation of living beings. In both cases the crime is one that falls under the rubric of idolatry.

One of the more persistent allegations against images, especially in Christian cultures, is that pictures and statues, being essentially material, are by their very nature incapable of adequately circumscribing the divine, the spiritual and the essentially immaterial. To attempt to do so is also to make false gods, which have to be cast down in order to preserve the purity of religion or the state.

The notion that images are idolatrous forms an important element in the motivation for many iconoclastic acts and attitudes. Images are taken to be idols when they do not represent the true god; when they are identified with the god or divinity itself (rather than simply as mediators); and when they are wrongly or abusively worshipped or venerated (the German *Abgott* and Dutch *Afgod*, for example, convey more closely the sense of a deceptive deviation from the genuine god). They are seductive because they give the illusion of the godly or divine (as in the original sense of *eidolon*, ghost, phantom). With idolatry there is always a sense of devotion to a substitute for what ought to be the real object of devotion: hence idolatry can occur in the case of real, physical images, and in the more metaphorical sense in which we speak of 'false gods', usually something that is the subject of moral disapprobation. For the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers, avarice was regarded as an idol just as much as any image. Indeed, one consistent element in all allegations of idolatry is the moral dimension. There are no cases in which idolatry is taken to be something good or morally acceptable.

In iconoclastic movements, as well as in some individual cases, the iconoclasts may allege that the images of god (or the approved images of a particular society, whether god, ruler, or symbol of the regime) are not godly, but rather idolatrous. As if to demonstrate that they do not in fact have the powers attributed to them, or which true gods are supposed to have, they are mutilated, overthrown or destroyed. At the end of the sixth century, Gregory the Great threw the pagan idols – that is, the statues of classical antiquity – into the Tiber. They were idols not only because they were beautiful and therefore seductive, but because they were the replete symbols of a corrupt religion, only recently hostile to the true one.

One of the most consistent bases of all those reservations about images that terminate in their mutilation, removal or total elimination is the association between material images and sensuality. Precisely because of their materiality they cannot mediate with the world of the spirit. Both their materiality and their form engage and provoke our senses, through the channel of sight. Excessive engagement with the aesthetic pleasures of art leads only to luxury and seduction (as is frequently alleged in the case of the history of the Roman republic); the purity and primitive virility of the people are better preserved if images are not allowed to corrupt such virtues. Exotic images – and excessive interest in art – make people soft. Images – especially artistic ones – are thus proscribed, in the interests of the commonweal, of moral purity, and of a spirituality untrammelled by sensuality or materiality.

The same fears concerning images surface in modern societies, not simply in relation to the varieties of pornography, but also, in general, in relation to television. And just as in the old arguments, words and texts are assigned a truth value and a spiritual and cultural status that images, by their very nature, are not believed to have. They cannot attain this status, because they are material and sensual, and are perceived by the eyes, the most direct channel of all to the senses. Hearing now takes the place of seeing, not only as a more reliable form of perception, but also as a less potentially dangerous one.

Words replace images in societies that are purified of idolatry: written texts in literate societies, the spoken word in illiterate ones. The way is prepared first by censorship, and then, increasingly, by one or more of the varieties of iconoclasm

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DAVID FREEDBERG