

The Iconoclasts

A One Act Play

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Historical Background. In 780 A.D. Leo IV died under mysterious circumstances leaving his widow, Irene, as regent of the Roman Empire (also called the Byzantine Empire) for her son Constantine. By a series of manœuvres Irene eventually assumed complete control of the government — she was, in fact, the very first female Emperor — and waged a relentless battle with the Church for the restoration of the icons — which had been banned some years earlier as they were seen as a temptation to idolatry. She had a Church Council convened (in Nicæa) and the earlier arguments against the use of icons were (unsurprisingly) found to be wanting. Subsequently she had her son put to death for attempting to seize back control of the Empire in a failed coup. After this her reign went into a sharp decline and, after a proposal of marriage was made to her by the newly appointed Emperor of the West, Charlemagne, she succumbed to another palace coup led by the Logothete of the Treasury, Nicephorus, in 802. Irene was sent into exile and died shortly thereafter on the island of Lesbos.

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[The play is set on two levels: on the lower level there is a frieze of the Abraham and Isaac story — Abraham pulling back Isaac's head by the hair with a large knife placed to his throat, ready to cut it — which remains in place through the entire play. These characters act as the chorus, or narrators. On the upper level there is a throne on which the Empress Irene sits. The drama takes place around this throne.

The play opens with a spotlight on Abraham and Isaac, after which the lights on the main stage slowly come up.]

Abraham. Whoever speaks of the mercy of God, or the goodness of God,
Knows nothing of the mountains and deserts where God chooses to dwell.
For God does not live among towns and markets — in the din of crowds,
God walks only in remote places, hiding his face, hiding his thoughts;
He dresses as a stranger and is the wind crossing the desert,
And when there is sacrifice, he is the echo of the last cry, vanishing,
And he is the sand into which the innocent blood will drain and disappear.
As the Psalmist says: *The earth and all the inhabitants are dissolved:*
I bear up the pillars of it. Selah.

[The lights go up on the main stage. Irene enters and takes her place on the throne. There is an air about her of solemnity and menace. When she is seated and composed, the Patriarch of Constantinople enters.]

Irene What is it Patriarch? Why do you bother me?

Patriarch It was you who sent for me your Majesty.

Irene Why would I send for you? Do you suppose that I need the gold on my crosses shined? Are the teeth of the faithful in need of your special pulling? [*she relents*] But perhaps I did send for you after all. There are whispers that many of your fellow prelates are unhappy with the restoring of the icons. It has even been said — by your enemies I am sure, I am quite sure — that you yourself are not entirely reconverted.

Patriarch If God speaks to you and tells you what is true then I am as happy to hear it from you as from God himself. I am fortunate, indeed, that God has been so obliging.

Irene Have a care, prelate! Patriarchs are made and unmade by Emperors. Even God has no special use for once-upon-a-time churchmen.

Patriarch Much as God has seen fit to reconsider what he once said to your late husband, Leo IV. He had no sooner whispered in *his* ear than he dropped dead of it. I myself saw the body — never was there a clearer case of a puff-in-the-ear death.

Irene Husbands die of the strangest things. They test the very ingenuity of death. [*she pauses*] But I did not ask you here to banter-up that weak vessel, the late Emperor. Now that he has been fired off into Khazak Heaven let us not talk him back.

Patriarch Your majesty.

Irene I want to discuss with you the Icons. They are important to the faith of the people. If people are going to have to pray to the Invisible then they need something to look at while doing it. Even the Pope, in his windowless tower in Rome, can see that. Why make your scruples into a fog? Accept the best opinion. Let us have peace and accord in the Empire — a joyful unanimity.

Patriarch Harmony is what all people of God desire.

Irene Then accept.

Patriarch There is just this minor matter — so minor that I hesitate to trouble the air with the mention of it — of Idolatry. God may have written his Word in lettering so small that it is beneath the notice of Popes and Princes, but it cannot be beneath the notice of the *entire* Church. I have often thought that God has given us the Bible so as to trip us up in our free invention of what He might mean — and every now and then He is so bold as to make His

meaning unutterably plain; so that those who wish to clear it must sail very high indeed. So He has in this case.

Irene Come. Come. This is a matter that has been set aside by experts. God does not wish us to worship images *in place of* Him. But that is not what our Icons are for. Icons are just a way of worshipping *through* an image to God Himself. They focalize the prayers of the faithful, making what is infinitely distant seem close.

Patriarch I believe your Majesty has put her finger on the source of my worry. God is infinitely distant, infinitely unknowable. But by providing some surrogate that is imaginable it falsifies God's true nature. Indeed it falsifies us straight out of our belief. And — if I might say — straight into Hell.

Irene Why is it that churchmen cannot argue without instantly trumping it up to Infinity? Someone pulls a kitchen knife on you and you threaten to detonate the world. There is a certain weakness of mind there.

Patriarch I concede your Majesty's point about my kind. But you must understand my difficulty. You would have me talk of God without mentioning God . . .

Irene [*impatiently*] I would simply like you to discuss this matter without trying to ship those who disagree with you off to Hell, the instant the first syllable leaves their lips.

Patriarch I shall try to remain mindful of *who* has the power to ship *who* off to Hell.

Irene [*ignoring the irony*] Please do.

Patriarch Let me make my point over . . .

Irene Let you not. A poor argument does not become better by fattening it out with more carefully picked words. You may as well feed it radishes!

Patriarch I was only going to say what your Majesty herself would likely insist on: that just as a representation of your Majesty's *majesty* by a dull, servant girl would falsify its

near-infinite excellence, so also does a representation of God falsify if it makes the distant, near; put the intangible within one's grasp; render the infinite finite.

Irene I don't see how else we can represent the infinite since the finite is all that we have about us.

Patriarch That is perfectly true your Majesty. But they are not simply different in number, they are *qualitatively* different. The difference between the finite and the infinite is not like the difference between five and six — it is more like the difference between nothing and something. It is a different order of Being.

Irene You should be careful Patriarch! The vulgar will hear what you say as an excuse not to believe in God. For if the finite is all that we know and the infinite is of a different kind to it then it *might seem* to follow that we cannot know God.

Patriarch That is why we have reason — that we might go beyond our brutish experience. For in our experience we are no better than a dog, a lion or a snake — and perhaps we are even inferior to some of those. But reason takes us far beyond. And by reason we are able to form a conception of the infinite by taking the limit of more and more excellent things. Thus do we transcend our experience.

Irene But now I think I have you checkmate, Patriarch.

Patriarch [*surprised*] How so, your Majesty?

Irene For if reason allows us to form a conception of the infinite through successive approximation then why should not an Icon, by representing something more harmonious and beautiful than the world that we find about us, point our minds toward God.

Patriarch Yes, well . . .

Irene And once our minds are become arrows *then* may they find their targets.

Patriarch I see the strength in what you say and yet, I confess, that there is still something that troubles me. And I confess that perhaps it is my own infirmity of mind that allows doubts that your Majesty would find too weak to overrun me.

Irene Say.

Patriarch It is that the people do not worship the Icons as a way of reaching God, they worship them as though God were present in the Icon itself. And it is that that speaks of idolatry.

Irene Patriarch, I fear that you are become so intelligent that you are able to think one thing on Friday and yet its opposite on Saturday. The people, on the other hand, are so dull that they must make do thinking the one thing throughout the week. Do you wish to say now that God is so *bounded* that he is *unable* to exist in some part of his creation?

Patriarch Not at all . . .

Irene Do you wish to say that he must *choose* to be absent from an Icon—though he may perfectly be able to exist in some other part of his creation?

Patriarch Certainly not . . .

Irene And have you not just finished saying that God is infinite—and what could that mean but that he encompasses and includes everything that is finite as a part of Himself? And is not an Icon such a thing?

Patriarch Your Majesty is using an intelligence that makes this battle uneven. And yet . . .

Irene Go on.

Patriarch Our pagan forefathers believed that Zeus is somehow in the statue of Zeus. Now you want to say, your Majesty, that there really is a God in the statue, only our ancestors had the name wrong. But what is in a name? May God not have performed the proper

translation on pagan speech? So must you not say that everyone who has prayed to an Idol has been right to do so, because there really was a god present there?

Irene I do say that intension not sounds are what matters, if that is any help.

Patriarch And for God our meanings are as vague as our words. And so He may make precise what we leave vague in whatever way He chooses. But to do so randomly would be inconsistent with his nature and his goodness: therefore He either will interpret all Icons as representations of Him, or none at all. Therefore either Paganism is effective along with Christianity or everything is equally ineffective. But the former is impossible leaving only the latter. So all icons are ineffective.

Irene I can see, Patriarch, that you do not have arguments — you have trained snakes that bite where you will.

Patriarch A man who can train snakes will do well in a world of snakes.

Irene I am not interested in your animal husbandry! You may race vultures for all I care. I am interested in the representations of our God. And what you say, I do not believe. For God is in the head of Zeus only in the same sense in which God is in any lump of stone. But He is in an icon in a greater sense: for an icon is a *lens* in which the Infinite is made to seem closer . . .

Patriarch But this then takes us back to the issue of whether there can be any representation of God.

Irene So this is the point you wish to stick on.

Patriarch It is.

Irene And by this you mean that no representation can convey to the mind any sense of the nature of God.

Patriarch That is correct.

Irene [in triumph] Then I ask you, Patriarch, how the *words of the Bible* may convey to us any sense of the nature of God—for these are also representations! A description in *words* may be less vivid than a painting, but it is no less a representation! On your argument we should take the entire Bible as a misleading falsification of the nature of God. It would be lies from start to finish! Indeed, the very reverse of the Truth.

Patriarch I, I . . .

Irene When the believer speaks the words of our Lord, do we not think that they represent what is true? Do we not revere them? Do we not glimpse the Divine through them—through a glass darkly, as it may be, but still *through*, to something on the other side? To say that words cannot convey any conception of the Divine is to say that even *God's Word* cannot convey any sense of the Divine—and that is a heresy so black that I would have thought that even a man of the church might hesitate at adopting it.

Patriarch [pleadingly] No your majesty . . .

Irene But still, if that is your view . . .

Patriarch No, no, I beg you . . .

Irene And then, of course, all *thoughts* of God are also representations — and so on your view must be falsifying. Well, so be it . . . Then even the thought that God exists must be falsifying. But I beg you to explain how, Patriarch — how does *that* representation fail to represent. It seems to me that on your view there are no true thoughts or words that may represent God to us. It is a blackness so complete that no light may emerge from it. A thought pushed to the rim of intelligibility — and then nudged beyond.

Patriarch It is certainly true that I do not want to say such things. [recovering] However, I would go part of the way — and that is that I think it will lead us less surely into error if we remind ourselves of what God is not than if we

try to attribute to God positive characteristics. In fact, in general, it is not easy to say of the infinite what it positively is, though one can say what it is not, and give it, as it were, a negative picture. So we can say of an infinite number that it is *not* reached by adding one to any finite number — but who can say more than this? The orders of Being are in bands, cut off from one another, and we occupy one such band. What it is like to dwell where God dwells is something that even death may not tell us.

Irene I can see, Patriarch, that you have moderated yourself into a position that leaves us little room for argument.

Patriarch It is the intelligence of intelligence to so often find itself in agreement with power.

Irene I am glad that you understand that — there is nothing that an Empress wants less than unintelligent subjects, mewling their disagreements at the birds!

Patriarch May I add, your majesty, that it has always seemed a wonderful mystery that just as we occupy the realm of the finite and God the infinite, so we also occupy the realm of the contingent and God the necessary. Would it not be economical if these two realms coincided? And is it not interesting to further wonder if there are realms *beyond*: the hyper-infinite and the super-necessary. Why should it stop? And who knows where in all this God might really be? We might seek him as in a maze — in one room after another.

Irene [*pauses before speaking*] You know, while we have been chatting here so pleasantly, great events have been unfolding — events of which you have been happily ignorant.

Patriarch [*surprised*] Your Majesty?

Irene Yes, [*brushing something from her lap*] momentous events!

Patriarch An affair of the realm?

Irene Yes, very much an affair of the realm. [*slight pause*]

My son — the son of the late Emperor, Leo — has fallen in with bad company. It is the sort of thing that will befall a weak-minded boy and Constantine is weak-minded. Moreover, he is an Iconoclast like his father and like his father he desires to rule the Empire with no assistance from me. But the sting of ingratitude that a mother feels is small and insignificant in comparison with the wrath of an Empress. And an Empress can show no mercy.

Patriarch Emperors can and have shown mercy. Countless times!

Irene No! An Emperor can show no mercy. My son has conspired with his young friends to stir the army against me, to murmur against my lovers, to open the treasury and show us bankrupt — but most of all he has desired to steal back the throne. And what then of me? Cast out on the world, to drift like flotsam, with every shore hostile. To have even the sun turn its back to me. To feel death one's only remaining friend. No, the Empire then might not care for me — for what does it care for *any* beggar — but *now, now when I am Empress* it cares! And it is *this* that I take between forefinger and thumb to sew up my child's fate.

Patriarch I beg you to reconsider . . .

Irene There is no considering! It is already done. An hour before you met me here I gave orders to his friends to take him away and burn out his eyes.

Patriarch It cannot be so.

Irene [*smiles — an awful smile*] You are surprised that I am so calm — that I do not tremble. You had not thought me so full of courage. You had not thought me so full of manly virtues.

Patriarch I had not thought . . . [*he bites his tongue*]

Irene Just so — you can scarcely believe that my mettle is so strong. I can scarcely believe it myself, but there it is! I

feel myself becoming the Emperor that I am, transforming into the steel and flint that all Emperors eventually become.

Patriarch [softly, as if to a child] Those are but statues of Emperors, your Majesty, they are not the real thing.

Irene When Emperors die they are immortal stone. I speak to them, pray to them, just as I do the icons of our Saviour—and they whisper back, in words of stone, the truth that all Emperors know: that mercy is impossible.

Patriarch That cannot be what God says to you when you pray, for Christ's message is precisely one of infinite mercy.

Irene [still dreamily] Ah yes, God is 'infinitely' merciful — but have you yourself not just finished arguing that nothing on Earth can resemble the infinite characteristics of God. Very well then, the mercy of Emperors resembles not at all the mercy of God.

Patriarch You turn my own words against me — and for the purpose of wickedness.

Irene I simply ask you to be consistent. Just as we know God to be consistent. But an Emperor cannot afford to be consistent, for an Emperor must rule come what may or cease to *be* an Emperor. And so I have had my son made blind — by the very friends who have led him into his treachery against me. And once blind he can never in the future become Emperor — his ambitions are over, from this day.

Patriarch So you no longer have an heir. There is no longer a line of succession. Do you not realise what chaos you have let into this house? Every soldier will now imagine himself a future King. Your throne will never again be safe!

Irene [shows signs that this point has hit home] What peace would my reign have had if it had been cut short by a coup this day? None. I have acted as best I could.

Literature and Aesthetics

Patriarch I was concerned for the future of the Empire, your Majesty, not simply your reign.

Irene Being concerned for the future of the Empire is the job of Emperors.

Patriarch Quite so! Yet what concern have you shown?

Irene [*angrily*] That is too far!

[*There is a moment of terrible silence.*]

Irene [*forgivingly*] I must remember to myself that you are a man of faith and therefore unused to the protocols of the Court. I should find myself amused by your other-worldliness, scholar.

Patriarch Your Majesty is too kind.

Irene There is more at stake here than you understand. I am not just concerned with the peace of the Empire in the next fifty years. My mind is on the next *thousand* years.

Patriarch How so?

Irene My son is an Iconoclast. If he were to become Emperor he would send us back to the darkest days of Leo III. The churches would be stripped of their remaining statues; their pictures; their mosaics. The walls would be scrubbed clean, back to the stone — they will look like empty caves. Private homes would once again be pillaged. What the people managed to hide in the last purge would be swept up . . .

Patriarch Even I do not remember those days fondly.

Irene For the people those were days of terror. A vicious taxation under the thin disguise of new church doctrine.

Patriarch The people were indeed very sorely pressed.

Irene And they have not forgotten it. I do not believe that they will stand for a second wave.

Patriarch [*soberly*] Possibly not.

Irene But besides the people there is the greater matter. God's face would disappear from the Earth. Perhaps forever. As if the sun were to set never to rise again. Can you imagine what that might mean?

Patriarch I don't think I understand, your Majesty.

Irene You are blinkered, Patriarch, by your own past. You grew up with crosses and icons and you cannot fathom your own indebtedness to them — you cannot see how much less you might have been without them. But it is not vague abstractions that first fire people, it is *beauty* — a beauty that is sharpened to an arrow point. That flies toward God. It is that that people kneel before, that floods their soul with radiance.

Patriarch But God's Word . . .

Irene No one would wish this world to disappear and be replaced by a description of it!

Patriarch No, perhaps not . . .

Irene The eyes are the windows of the soul. But they are not the windows onto *our* soul — hey are the windows onto the *world's* soul. It is the *world as it looks* that is its very essence. And it is in its *beauty* that we first sense that the heart borders on Paradise.

Patriarch And what of icons?

Irene Our icons are an increase in the sum of beauty — and they are not mute pointers to God, they are the very face of God. They are God's lightning rod on Earth. What will the next thousand, or ten thousand years be like, if God's representation be wiped clean from the world? What madness would people fall into? Without that infinite mirror the soul will wither and die — the heart would lose its immersion in the great oceans of an afternoon, a morning would no longer fan into everything possible. Night would no longer be a well into which thoughts fall soundlessly. An artless madness

would seize the world. That is why I thought it a fit punishment for my wayward son: let him be blinded. Let him not see the face of God — just as he wishes that others may not see it again. Let him wander in the darkness that he has wished upon others.

Patriarch And yet . . .

[A messenger enters and goes down on one knee to the side of the throne. He wears a mask.]

Irene What is it?

Messenger Your Majesty, I have news. Grave news.

Irene Go on.

Messenger Your Majesty, you gave orders that your son, Constantine, be taken to a private place by his friends—and there made blind . . .

Irene [*uncomfortable*] I do not acknowledge it. What is your news?

Messenger Your Majesty, they burned into his eye sockets with a poker taken straight from the fire, but . . . they burned too deep, and it passed into his brain. For an hour he lay, by turns, feverish and screaming, calling for you, his mother, to save him. . . . Then he died.

[Irene is frozen in shock, her face a study of despair; the Patriarch also is shocked and doesn't know whether to say something or to keep silent. He is unsure whether he should dismiss the messenger.]

Irene My . . . boy. My . . . boy

Patriarch Your Majesty.

Irene [not listening] My boy . . . I had thought that, blind, he would be mine again. That he would need his mother once more. That it would be just as when he was cradled in my arms . . .

Patriarch Your Majesty . . . [trying to stop her from speaking in front of the messenger]

Irene My boy. [in her distraction she looks over at the messenger, unseeing]

Messenger Do you have some instruction that you wish me to pass on?

Irene Hmm? No. No. [coming to a thought] Tell me, before he died did he know that it was I . . .

Messenger [hesitating] I believe that it was said to him, your Majesty.

Irene [her face falls further] Ahh. . . Ah, I see.

Messenger But he may have been in no fit state to understand, for he was raving.

[*The Patriarch waves discretely at the messenger to quiet him.*]

Patriarch It was an accident, your Majesty.

Irene It was a fate.

Patriarch But you were not to blame.

Irene No, I was not to blame. [recovering a little — to the messenger] Pass instruction that those who have done this to my son are to be arrested and executed instantly. Not one of them is to be left alive. Nor are they to be allowed to utter a word. [*the messenger exits*] Yet what is this but God's great exchange: sacrifice of the first-born son, God's killing, so that God's face may remain in the world, so that His 'sun' may not set. [*bitterly*] My 'burnt

offering'. [*intoning*] I gave my only begotten son so that He, God, may live forever . . . so that He may have Eternal Life. And all I require of Him — all I require — is that He believe in me. That He have faith! . . . all I ask. Then may *He have life everlasting*. Amen.

Patriarch Amen.

[*The lights go down on Irene and the Patriarch and the messenger re-enters and removes his mask. He speaks to the audience.*]

Messenger It is said that on the death of Constantine the sky over Constantinople went black and the city was shrouded in darkness for seventeen full days. Ships were blown off their courses and wrecked. But Iconoclasm was defeated, not finally on that day — but within fifty years it was no more. Art flourished in Christendom for the next thousand years.

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