Breaking the Image, Celebrating the Word: Byzantine Iconoclasm and the Tendency to Abstraction

Vrasidas Karalis

Byzantine iconoclasm (725-843) was quite a paradoxical historical incident, which has defied so far all attempts for explanation and interpretation. The imperially endorsed break with a long standing and revered visual tradition and the abrupt abandoning of the representational visuality that had dominated the Greco-Roman world in favour of a non-representational and aniconic pictorial abstraction was an unexpected and somehow anomalous paradigm shift. Indeed the transition from an *iconoplastic* visual regime to a *logomorphic* lexical symbolism, by substituting images with words, has been one of the most puzzling questions in the history of art, representational thinking and indeed social culture. The fact that such a change was attempted without a preceding structural shift in the world-view of the period, with the introduction of a new religion for example, further complicates the question. All Mediterranean cultures had been anthropomorphic in their long established representational codes; divine hierophanies or indeed theophanies were symbolically represented through objects, human forms and imaginative constructs, through iconographic signs which themselves indicated the presence of the deity or of a sacred entity. The image represented the immanent presence of the depicted form – indeed in the common practice, it *was* the form itself.

Consequently, the sudden privileging of the word over the image, and the concomitant 'smashing' of iconic signs still remains a serious oxymoron – especially if we situate the events of the dispute, in its various stages, within the ubiquitous Hellenic monuments throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, the question is more confusing, since it took place at the centre of the eastern Roman Empire, the city of Constantinople, in which by then almost all of the most important monuments of antiquity must have been amassed on public display. At theoretical level, Suzannah Biernoff's study on the "ocularocentrism of the Medieval visual cultures," although it does not discuss iconoclasm, raises some pertinent questions regarding the ultimate presuppositions and effects of the movement. Biernoff stresses that "in the Middle Ages, vision was a way of relating to oneself, to the sensible world including other animate beings, and to God. As such, it exceeded both viewing

subjects and visible objects, as well as determining their mode of interaction."[1] The sudden transition from such 'physical ocularocentrism' to a new visual regime of 'ocularophobia' raises many questions not simply about the politics around representation but about the legitimacy of representation itself: it expresses a structural implosion within the existing modes of representation and indeed a conflict between visual discourses and practices.

Scholars have put forward various political and social interpretations. However, the philosophical background of Iconoclasm and its intellectual premises has not been studied extensively and it has to be revisited. It is unfortunate that almost all of its artistic production of the period perished, after the victory of the iconophiles; it is also unfortunate that we do not have direct access to the writings of the most important iconoclastic thinkers, except through the writings of their opponents – although the Definition of the Iconoclastic Council of Constantinople (754) offers substantial information.[2]

The philosophical indeterminacy of the period begs for more discussion about its possible motives and causes. John Haldon attributed the destruction of images to "the dramatic reduction in all forms of secular literary activity", "the almost complete dominance of writing of a theological nature" and the "great flourishing of hagiography" during the last period of the dispute.[3] The historical adventures of the period have also generated intense debate. In a recent monumental study, Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon attempted both to recapitulate all existing research and to suggest an interpretative hypothesis about the movement. For them the questions surrounding iconoclasm first referred to the crisis of representation that we see happening in the seventh and eight centuries, and second to the Byzantine response to Islam.[4] Both points need more discussion and closer examination. Iconoclasm took place when Byzantium, despite its military defeat, enjoyed a unique prestige amongst its enemies, especially the newly Islamised victorious Arabs, in particular in the early period. The fact that it was inaugurated from above, as the emperor's policy, makes it rather unlikely to think of it as a gesture of good will towards the enemy or an implicit acceptance of its ascendancy and its cultural

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Vrasidas Karalis is Professor in the Department of Modern Greek Studies at the University of Sydney.

[1] Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (London: Palgrave, 2002), p. 3.

[2] Information on the Council of 754 in Edward James Martin, *A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy* (New York: AMS Press, 1978), pp. 35-60.

[3] John Haldon, *Byzantium. A History* (London: Tempus Publications, 2005), p. 235.

[4] Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680-850: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 774.

supremacy. One could claim that despite all external challenges, it represented an *internal need* of the social and the social imaginary of the period in its attempts to construct new representational codes and new cultures of visuality. The fact that it failed and was succeeded by the ebullient and colourful neo-classicism of the Macedonian dynasty indicated that the disappearance of form and figuration was in fact preparing a new understanding of its function and nature. The vanishing of form was in fact a re-affirmation of its validity and its valuation of reality and in the case of Byzantium of its social, religious and political order. However, as it has been noticed, not all representation was destroyed during the Byzantine iconoclasm; as Andre Grabar has indicated, the emperors used extensively decorative motifs, effigies of themselves and also secular representations, as races and monsters, within some churches as well. As Grabar states "in churches where sacred images were stamped out one could find trees, plants of all kinds, vegetable gardens and even aviaries – that is to say birds among plants". And he concludes: "All these subjects, some of which were aniconic, do not seem to have been invented by the iconoclasts. It was rather a revival of decoration without figures, which as one could see before in paleo-Christian churches."[5]

Certainly, the fact that the emperors themselves were responsible indicates what Moshe Barash has pointed out; namely that the "icon was, explicitly and directly, an object of political struggle, a central political symbol."[6] As a political symbol 'the broken icon' would have indicated a moral or religious victory of Islam, something which the Byzantine emperors, especially the Isaurians, would have been extremely cautious in avoiding. Islam was definitely at the intellectual horizon of such fundamental paradigm shift, but only as a secondary background reason of the tendency to redesign the political map of the world, by changing symbols of cultural prestige and indirectly the legitimacy for religious, and of course cultural and political, hegemony.

However, Brubaker's and Haldon's suggestion about a crisis in representation must be taken seriously and be thoroughly discussed by extending its ramifications towards different directions. The idea for the present exploration originated in reading a number of different and, to certain extent, contradictory studies referring to iconoclasm and its continuing legacies today. Marie-Jose Boudinet attempted a densely philosophical reading of an excerpt by the Patriarch Nicephorus from the series of refutations of the iconoclastic ideas entitled *Antirhetics*. Nicephorus (758-828) in his attempt to

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[5] Andre Grabar, *Byzantium: Byzantine Art in the Middle Ages* (London: Matheun, 1966), p. 90.

[6] Moshe Barash, *Icon, Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 186.

re-affirm the centrality of the human face and thus of human presence and corporeality, draws a sharp ontological distinction between the image and the represented, between the icon and the iconised. In a sense he distinguishes between iconography and reality, mimesis and nature, by stressing the essential autonomy of both realms of being, while recognising their interconnectivity. He stresses that "graphic inscription":

> is completely independent, even though, wherever it is, inscription remains determined by its role as figuration. Circumscription, on the contrary, encloses in a simple though not figuratively determined fashion, all that is by nature circumscribable. More simply put: graphic inscription does not circumscribe man, even if he is circumscribable, any more than circumscription figures him, even if he is figurable. Each notion has its own rationale.[7]

Their mutual dependence makes Nicephorus suggest that physical forms lead by their very presence the mind to construct its own images intentionally and thus to create a second order reality, which links *what* is perceived with *how* it is imagined. Such a distinction reasserts for him the necessity of artistic representation as *an extension of life*, not simply as reflection or reproduction of it. This position was opposed to the iconoclast for whom, as Boudinet stresses "any illusion of plenitude is defeated by a graph that does not enclose anything – a truly open form that breaks up space without outlining it. Emptiness cannot assume the form of content, nor can forms cope with emptiness."[8] For the eighth century believer, art had a life of its own as it stressed the difference between actual materiality and 'pneumatic symbolism' which, in a subliminal way, was legitimised by the underlying grand narrative of the Christian mythos, about the incarnation. For the iconophile, image and word complemented each other, indeed re-created different but complementary dimensions of the same experience. For the iconoclast on the contrary, the mythos itself did not need any form of representation: the iconicity of words, the proclamation of the Word (*Logos*) as the ultimate visual and aural experience, was only needed in order to re-enact the mystery of incarnation, at least in church liturgically. The question was both a matter of wording and of semantics. The word *eikon* in Greek had the double meaning of the 'imprint' of an object and, at the same time, an extension of its essence, its reflection and shadow. The iconoclasts did not make the distinction, and mostly used the word *eikon* as employed in the fundamental passage from Genesis: "let us

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[7] Marie-Jose Boudinet, 'The Antirheticus of Patriarch Nicephorus,' in *Fragments for a History of the Body*, ed. Michel Faher, Ramona Naddaf and Nadia Tazzi (London and New York: Zone Books, 1989), Vol. 1, p. 159.
[8] Boudinet, 'The Antirheticus,' p. 155.

make man in our image and likeness," which in the Septuagint text was "poiesomen anthropon kat' eikona imeteran kai omoiosin."[9]

In the previous centuries, the word *omoiosis* caused considerable theological and political anxieties; by then, the word *eikon* seemed to have resumed the same role, as the iconoclasts were textual literalists and took the word to indicate similarity in essence and not visual affinity. Indeed the paradox of the iconoclastic dispute can be seen in the juxtaposition of two other Greek words: *ensarkosis* and *enanthropisis*. The iconophiles accepted the later: the word did not simply become flesh (*sarx*)[10] but *anthropos* whereas for the iconoclasts the word became incarnate, in the sense of 'pure humanity,' an idea that can reclassify the iconoclatic movement as a form of monophysite heresy.

The artistic implications of such iconoclastic ideas are more obvious if we turn to one of the most important philosophers of hermeneutics in the 20th century Hans Georg Gadamer. In the beginning of his essay *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer states:

> The rejection of iconoclasm, movement that had arisen in the Christian Church during the sixth and seventh centuries [read: eighth and ninth], was a decision of incalculable significance. For the Church then gave a new meaning to the visual language of art and later to the forms of poetry and narrative. This provided art with a new form of legitimation.[11]

Gadamer indicated the urgent need for legitimacy that the iconoclasts must have felt when they underestimated the significance of sensory expression. They reacted, however, not simply by putting an end to an idolatrous practices of antiquity; the distraction of images indicated the zealous persistence for a return to the primary *aural* experience of the Word, to the God of the Hebrew Bible who speaks and dictates, instead of the son of God whom, as it was mentioned in John's Epistle:

> it was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it with our hands; and it is of this we tell. Our theme is the word of life. This life was made visible; we have seen it and bear our testimony; we here declare to you that eternal life which dwelt with the Father and was made visible to us.[12]

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[9] Genesis, 1, 26; Alfred Rahlfs, *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1982), p. 2.

[10] John, 1, 14.

[11] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. with an introduction by Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 3-4.

[12] 1 John, 1:1-2.

John insists that through such communion of all senses with the Son, the faithful can receive communion (*koinonia)* with the Father, as the source of all meaning; he attributes thus to visible form not simply the role of the mediator but of the bridge-maker between the visible and the invisible realities. The return to such beginnings meant the de facto abolition of history through the devaluation of the collective experience of the Church and in political terms a new orientation for the Christian Empire which would abolish the past. By going back to the origins, the iconoclasts aspired in arresting history to an abstract symbol without history in itself – indeed it seems as they propagated the idea that something had gone wrong with the Empire and they were undertaking the responsibility to rectify it and restore its authenticity.

The iconoclast collapsed under what Suzannah Biernoff detected as the fundamental tension in the coexistence of two competing but somehow complementary forms of visual culture during the Middle Ages: the conflict, both internal and external, between ocularophobia and ocularocentrism.[13] The ocularophobia of iconoclasm found justification in Paul's pronouncement that faith comes through hearing and the hearing through the word of Christ: ἄρα ἡ πίστις ἐξ ἀκοῆς, ἡ δὲ ἀκοὴ διὰ ῥήματος Χριστοῦ.[14] The tension has been usually interpreted in essentialist terms, as indicating the so-called Hellenic and the Hebraic elements constituting the Christian heritage; in reality, such tensions existed within each culture, and mutual contacts accelerated the process of a paradigmatic implosion from within. The truth about the coexistence of different tendencies within the same tradition can be seen only when cultural cross-fertilisation takes place; such period was the great transition of the seventh and eighth centuries, when the real break with antiquity took place and new forms of expression became necessary to express the prestige of power, the authority of the church and finally the ideal form of social order. Bernard Murchland, in his *The New Iconoclasm,* made a provocative and an extremely relevant observation: "The iconoclast smashed the icons because he felt they came between him and the genuine object of his worship; he wanted to get beyond the representation to the real thing."[15]

All these attempts to define or redefine the importance and contemporary relevance of iconoclasm converge in some very important issues: first, that had iconoclasm prevailed there would be no figurative representation in Europe and no legitimation of its very existence; second, that the iconoclast was searching for 'the real thing,' the thing-in-itself, which could be found only in

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[13] Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*, pp. 1-6.

[14] Romans, 10:17.

[15] Bernard Murchland Bernard, *The New Iconoclasm, Reflections for a Time of Transition* (New York: A Delta Book, 1972), p. 3.

its verbal form, unmediated by cultural metaphors, visual schematisation or pictorial semiotics; and third, that the historical defeat of iconoclasm contributed to the legitimation of the human body as the axial iconocentrism of the cultural imaginary in the West; the victory of the iconophiles established the foundations for the anthropomorphic conceptualisation of history and metaphysics that dominated Western thinking until the late ninetieth century, and the rise of post-Nietzschean nihilism.

The issues raised so far indicate that iconoclasm did not simply aspire in destroying religious images; beyond this, it effaced and obliterated visible corporeality from the visual language of artistic representation. For the iconoclast the body was perishable and corruptible, reducible only to its verbal ekphrasis. There is nothing in it that could transcend ephemerality and become distinctly 'personal'; nothing that could be appropriated, or communicated, to another gaze in another moment of time or that could frame a pictorial space of figuration in an artistic language of common symbols. The substitution of form by words, by calligraphic virtuosity or biblical passages, did not simply indicate the primacy of the Christian *Logos*, since "the word became flesh and abode between us,"[16] but it abolished corporeal presence as an ontological reality, paving the way for a form of proto-nihilism regarding the ability of the mind to stand face to face with the 'thing itself.'

Thus in iconoclasm, we do not only find the idea of the un-representability of form but at the same time of the inability of human gaze to find anything meaningful in visual representation. The geometrisation of art we detect during the period, from the very few surviving specimens representing crosses against an empty background, simply denies the ability of the distinctly personal body to circumscribe its own spatial limits and thus to become the object of its own vision. The absence of 'self objectification' indicated the human inability for self-introspection which through reflection affirms the possibility of an intelligible world understood by human rationality. The invisibility of the body in iconoclasm meant the rejection of visual perception as a reliable source of rational cognition, while at the same time reduced all experience to a verbal configuration of textual references without contextual underpinnings. At the same time, it meant the devaluation of the body as felt materiality and its erasure under vertical and horizontal lines which refer to a specific event in the Christian master narrative, i.e. the Crucifixion.

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[16] John, 1:7.

Figure 1: St Irene, the Apse, Istanbul, 8th century [photo taken by the author].

As mentioned before, unfortunately, no artistic object has survived the end of the iconoclastic period and certain traces of its art are rather insufficient evidence to support any general theory. However, we know that although secular artefacts continued to use representations of the human body, religious objects became increasingly aniconic, abstract and geometrical. Boudinet refers to the "cruciform semiotics"[17] of iconoclasm pointing thus to the almost general replacement of all artistic figures by the sign of the cross as symbol of triumphant imperial Christianity. As an example the epigram composed by a certain Stephen, about whom we know nothing else, after the destruction of the image of Christ at the Imperial Palace:

> The Emperors Leo and his son Constantine
> Thought it dishonour to the Christ divine
> That on the very Palace Gate he stood,
> A lifeless, speechless, effigy of wood.
> Thus what the Book forbids they did replace
> With the believers' blessed sign of grace.[18]

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[17] Boudinet, 'The Antirheticus,' p. 155.
[18] Martin, *A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy*, p. 129.

The emphasis given on the narrative of the Book that is on the Scriptural authority over the dominant Greco-Roman visual culture is probably one of the main paradoxical characteristics of Iconoclasm. It was as if they wanted to re-write history and re-start Christianity and transform it into the religion of the one single book, as the ultimate code in social conduct and creative practice, bringing thus Christianity closer to Islam and early Judaism.[19]

Definitely, the significance of the cross in the Christian narrative was and still remains central; but it never became so crucial as during this period and it never acquired the religious and symbolic autonomy which was invested with then (and the domination of the cross ever since must be seen as one of the enduring legacies of iconoclasm). In the previous century the representation of Christ as the Lamb of God, or even earlier as the fish, was abolished and the human face was elevated to the supreme symbol of the incarnation and the humanisation of the divine. Canon 82 of the Quinisext Council (692) prescribed that:

> in order that 'that which is perfect' may be delineated to the eyes of all at least in coloured expression, we desire that the figure in human form of the Lamb who taketh away the sin of the world Christ our God be henceforth exhibited in images instead of the ancient lamb, so that all may understand by means of it the depths of the humiliation of the Word of God, and that we may recall to our memory his conversation in the flesh, his passion and salutary death and his redemption which was wrought for the whole world.[20]

In a sudden and abrupt break with a continuous cultural tradition, such an important decision was overturned and the impersonal, linear, colourless and abstract shape of the Cross was pronounced as the recognitional emblem of Christianity – in some instances even replaced by scriptural excerpts forming the sign of the cross. The main problem that arises from such a development is that of discontinuity. How was possible for the fundamentally anthropomorphic Greco-Roman tradition to suddenly separate itself from its very roots and origins? Throughout the ancient pagan world human face, the very frontality of depiction became the 'foundational space' on which communities could represent its anthropology in a visual language easily perceived by the senses and clearly appropriated by the human gaze. It also indicated the radical rationalism of the Greek philosophy that an objectified reality was a conceptual schema that was both intelligible and explainable;

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[19] About its theological implications and links with early monophysitic Arianism see David M. Gwynn, 'From Iconoclasm to Arianism: The Construction of Christian Tradition in the Iconoclast Controversy,' *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, no. 47 (2007), pp. 225–251. See also its ample bibliography about the various historical and theological issues.

[20] Martin, *A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy*, pp. 142-43.

therefore within the Christian framework, it also indicated that the 'mystery' of religion could also be understood and rationally expressed.

The decorative motifs of the iconoclastic tradition, the arabesque shapes which endlessly perpetuated themselves hiding behind their very monotony the immanence of the transcendent divinity were peripheral within the Greco-Roman visual tradition. The idea of an unknown god, *agnostos theos,* or of an invisible deity, was always lurking at the background of Hellenistic paganism; Zeus the Saviour was not represented and was considered as the god of the invisible air, according to the poet Aratus.[21] As it is well-known, when Paul visited Athens found the famous altar dedicated to the unknown god, whose Greek term *agnostos* could be more properly translated as the unknowable and not the unknown god. The same notion could be found in the Neo-platonic substratum within Christian theology which stresses the very incorporeality of the divinity, the absence of material gravity in the divine essence.

However, even the Neo-Platonists lived in a social space dominated by figurative art and the works of Plotinus are full of metaphors of artistic iconography especially on the issue which interested them the most, that of the relation between the eye and ideal beauty, the question of visuality. On the other hand, even within the Jewish tradition pictorial representation was not unknown and had permeated the iconographic projects of the synagogue at Dura-Europos. Furthermore, the Neoplatonic substratum of the Byzantine tradition searched for 'immutable structures' under the ephemeral perishability of forms; that was given by the abstraction offered by numbers and geometric designs. As Gervase Mathew had observed "Byzantine civilisation was essentially mathematical in its emphasis on the inevitability of due proportion rhythm and order. This sense of the inevitable reflected the underlying serenity of the self-concentrated Byzantine culture, based on recognition of the dominance of Idea and of the rule of cool and temperate mind."[22]

Therefore, because of such underlying non figurative structure in the most lavish iconographic patterns of Byzantine art, we must revisit to the question of actual discontinuity between the figurative and the non-figurative representation in the period. The sudden break with the past and the imperial rejection of the most highly respected form of religious art, already so well established in peripheral centres such as the Sinai Monastery of St Catherine and in the great mosaics in Ravenna, has to be discussed in a more theoretical way in order to problematise the concept and the practice of Iconoclasm itself within its own historical realities and specificities.

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[21] Acts, 18:28.

[22] Gervase Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics* (London: John Murray London, 1963), p. 3.

Certainly we know from the very little evidence we posses that the edicts of the iconoclastic emperors and the decisions of the Synod at Hiereia (757) were not universally accepted and that local bishops were extremely reluctant in following similar orders from the imperial centre. At the same time we see, as mentioned earlier, the paradox of the untouchability of secular art; although religious art within churches was proclaimed illegal everywhere else in Constantinople secular art, even three-dimensional in form, was extremely common and represented the very essence of the cultural paradigm of the period, indeed the very sensory reality of the everyday life. As it has been observed: "The great break which it has been traditional to impose between late antiquity and the 'Dark Ages', or between Roman art and early Christian art, is a modern rhetorical fantasy."[23] Despite the rich religious folk-lore around the systematic destruction of icons, it would be fairer to talk about disruption in certain practices of figurative presentation and not about a complete break with the existing tradition.

One suggestion would be to accept the rather neglected hypothesis by Costas Papaioannou claiming, that, given the fact that aniconic tendencies always existed in the Christian Church, the specific episode indicated a return to a pristine form of Christian art. According to Papaioannou: "The iconoclastic emperors seem chiefly to have restored to a place of honour, the symbolism and naturalism of primitive Christianity."[24] Such return to the primitive period of Christianity indicated a crisis of identity within the Byzantine society and the Christian thinking itself. The 'repristination' of the word meant that images, and together with them the image-makers, had to accept their secondary position and stop usurping the creative fecundity of the divine. The image-makers, the iconographers, had to accept the absolute predominance of the spoken word, which created the world, and the unbridgeable otherness of the divine essence.

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[23] Jas Elsner, Jas, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph. The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100-450* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 259.

[24] Kostas Papaioannou, *Byzantine and Russian Painting* (London: Heron Books, 1965), p. 48.

Figure 2: Byzantine Museum, Athens, early Christian mosaic, 4th century
[photo taken by the author].

As Papaioannou astutely observed the defenders of icons, namely John Damascene and Theodore the Studite, "saw iconoclasm as the last resurgence of Monophysite transcendentalism, which denies the incarnation and with it Christ's mediation between heaven and earth, between things visible and invisible."[25] This also concurs to the idea that aniconic tendencies existed in Christianity since its very inception; Moshe Barash talks about "metaphysical iconoclasm"[26] already strongly articulated and emphasised with Origen and certainly with Eusebius. However, it seems that the imperial achievements of a series of emperors, like Theodosius and certainly Justinian, stressed the theatricality and the spectacular character of the imperial presence as a visual symbol of power and connection with God – to which Iconoclastic emperors came to react, although they added the figure of the *basileus* on their coins, after the triumphant early Byzantium was crippled by the invasions and the defeats of the seventh and eighth centuries.

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[25] Papaioannou, *Byzantine and Russian Painting*, p. 49.

[26] Barsh, *Icon, Studies in the History of an Idea*, p. 136.

Nevertheless, the decision to disrupt such tradition and simply depose religious art from the centre of visual culture had crucial implications for the overall artistic psychology of the day. In a recent article by Andrej Piotrowksi on architecture and the iconoclastic controversy we see the various manipulations of space employed during this period in order to use the void space within the church in a way similar to that of visual representation. Piotrowski calls such manipulations "nonfigurative representation"[27] and elaborates on how "while remaining empty and amorphous, the physical void space of a squinch acquires a degree of concreteness, materiality and tactility."[28]

Piotrowski attributes the theoretical justification of such allegorical function of the void space to the apophatic theological tradition in Byzantium. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite with his effective translocation of Neoplatonic and Platonic concepts into a Christian framework changed the function of art in a radical and permanent way which dominates the theological and iconographic traditions of the Eastern Churches to this day. The apophatic tradition perceives Godhead as the complete negation of the existing order. Stressing the complete otherness of the divinity, Pseudo-Dionysius 'deconstructed' all verbal stratagems, all rhetorical inventions, indeed all language in order to express the absolute darkness and void which could be imagined as the essence of the divine, indeed of the ineffable and the unrepresentable.[29]

In Byzantine art as a whole we must detect this underlying quest for the otherworldliness of the Divine and the search for artistically appropriate means to express the transcendental nature of its immanent presence. Unlike Western art after the Renaissance, Byzantine art defies all forms of similarity or dissimilarity to an actual prototype – if there is any prototype at all; it is not realistic, naturalistic or verisimilar art and it developed elements of an almost 'surreal' method for expressing its very purpose for being a 'window to eternity.' The awkward figurative patterns of Byzantine art were the end result of intense experimentation with form and light; they constantly developed and evolved into more complex and more esoteric expressions of various cultural

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[27] Andrei Piotrawski, 'Architecture and the Iconoclastic Controversy,' in *Medieval Practices of Space*, eds Barbara Hanawalt, Michael Kobialka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 109.

[28] Piotrawski, 'Architecture and the Iconoclastic Controversy,' pp. 109-110.

[29] As Eric D. Perl argued: Dionysius' "… negative theology consists not in any words or thoughts whatsoever, however negative or superlative, but in the absolute silence of the mind." Eric D. Perl, *Theophany, the Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 14.

needs and personal explorations of the period, following extremely sophisticated aesthetic theories, only today decoded by art historians.[30]

The very uniqueness of iconoclasm lies in the fact that it tried to present religious art as a *kenotic* space, as the space where divine self-emptying was to become felt without becoming visible. The iconoclasts stressed the invisible presence, the divine presence within history, without reference the very corporeality of human existence. They had a strong ally to their project: the apophatic tradition which emphasised the very otherness of the divinity. Here we mention a rather long passage from *The Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius in order to understand the artistic *telos* of the Byzantine theology. It is pertinent here to see that even at the most important monument of Byzantine art, the Hagia Sophia, figurative art was totally absent, although it thrived in peripheral centres outside the capital. Furthermore, John Onians has observed that at the narthex of Justinian's cathedral we see "stone slab men" whose "interior being is mapped by evanescent veining. Like an x-ray image of the spiritual, the curving lines brilliantly suggest the inner life that was alluded to in the Vision of the *Shepherd of Hermas* and in the *Psychomachia*."[31]

Figure 3: Hagia Sophia, Praying Forms, Narthex, 6th century [photo taken by the author].

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[30] Modern appropriations of iconoclasm in philosophical and aesthetical terms are discussed in Michael Kelly, *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially in the Preface, pp. ix-xiii.

[31] John Onians, *Classical Art and the Cultures of Greece and Rome* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 287.

That was the new Christian Art which did not emulate pagan models or imitate corruptible matter, but depicted the spiritual essence of beings as immaterial bodies, whose eikon was not reproducing a prototype, which 'no one had ever seen,' but depicted a post-visual or pre-optical reality without the 'fall' into materiality. The justification could be provided by Pseudo-Dionysius himself, whose writings became known probably around 532 for the first time. Godhead, says the anonymous author:

> is not soul, or mind, or endowed with the faculty of imagination, conjecture, reason or understanding; nor is It any act of reason or understanding; nor can It be described by the reason or perceived by the understanding … nor is It any other thing such as we or any other being can have knowledge of; nor does It belong to the category of non-existence or that of existence; nor do existent being know It as it actually is, nor does It know them as they actually are; nor can the reason attain to It name It or to know It; nor is Its darkness, nor is It light, or error, or truth; nor can affirmation or negation apply to it.[32]

And Pseudo Dionysius concludes: "It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of Its simple and absolute nature -free from every limitation and beyond them all."[33]

In this final chapter of the Pseudo-Dionysian treatise, we can easily trace the central dilemma of the Byzantine artist. The Sixth Ecumenical Synod (681) had succeeded in finalising the Christological doctrine around the hypostatic union in then person of Christ. The person of Jesus being paradoxically both human and divine provided a sign and cipher about how divine economy could confine the unlimited nature of Godhead in history and within the strictures of mortality. This precarious paradox remained at the centre of all Christian tradition and indeed at the heart of all theological debates: mortality and history being united with eternity and timelessness in a corporeal union. The sense of incomprehensibility of such mystery remained in the east one of the most important artistic postulates; and it was addressed throughout the Byzantine tradition in many different stylistic varieties which show the extreme vitality in the artistic conscience of the era, especially after the restoration of icons (843) and the rise of Macedonian neo-classicism. The re-affirmation of the unity of the person of Christ created an extremely strong tendency to express both divinity and humanity in their co-existence.

The formulation of the Christological doctrine as "*Christum Filium Dei, unigenitum, in duabus naturis incofusem, incovertibiliter, inseparabiliter,*

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[32] Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, trans. C.E. Rolt (London SPCK, 1977), pp. 200-01.
[33] Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names,* pp. 200-201.

indivise cognoscendum"[34] was indeed more confusing than resolving any tensions between Orthodox Christianity and many Eastern Monophysite Churches. In this we must pay special attention to the term 'knowable,' *cognoscendum*. Artistic representation had one purpose: to make the union known to humanity, to use humanity as the vehicle of mystical contemplation on the immanence and indeed the otherness of god.

It is interesting to remember that the iconoclasts did not simply destroy icons but tried to reform liturgical practices also. They banned candles, the veneration of holy relics, of incense and other external ornaments from churches having constantly in mind the invisibility and the void of God. In that respect iconoclasm separated divinity and humanity into unbridgeable realms. The destruction of the body, the complete rejection of matter meant the glorification of the divine darkness, the celebration of the unrepresentability of the Godhead. Words frame the unrepresentable while constructing the space of a semantic fusion between the viewer/believer and the absent image which words evoke. So, we can suggest a certain affinity between the concept of *deus absconditus* that manifests himself through signs and symbols, indicating a theology of eschatological imannentism as the cultural underpinnings of the iconoclastic movement itself.

In an interesting mosaic from Nicaea, destroyed in 1922 and depicting the Theotokos and the Child, certain interesting elements have been detected. The main element of the apse mosaic was a standing Theotokos and the Child. Around this can be seen an irregular black line on the gold background, following approximately the outline of Mary, and cutting across the jewelled step on which she stands. Level with her elbows can be traced a further black line, extending to either side in the rough shape of the cross. Above the Theotokos, the hand of God (also surrounded by a black line) extended from a segment of heaven and an inscription read: "I have begotten thee from the womb before the morning."[35]

It would not be far-fetched to suggest a hypothesis regarding the importance and the significance of these black lines: together with the cross they form an imagery of extreme importance which can be read today as an interesting indication of a gradual transition towards a form of visual geometric abstraction. The replacement of the body by vertical lines, or the circumscription of form by lines which never complete a figure, the extreme ellipsis in formal characteristics and their complete condensation to one point

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[34] In http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/main/chalcedon/chalcedonian_definition.shtml. Accessed 25/07/2012.

[35] Psalm 109:3. John Lowden, *Early Christian & Byzantine Art* (London: Phaidon, 1997), pp. 157-158.

of their contour show that, at least in the few specimens of iconoclastic art we posses, the tendency to abstraction was dominant. Mosaics within the churches were but colours and lines, vertical and horizontal lines, punctuated by the sign of the cross, "a pure symbol not soiled by any disproportionate ambition of representation",[36] as Alain Besancon stated. The abstract symbols situated against the background of an abstracted space may also refer to a 'mystical' form of Christianity, and to the complete allegorisation of formal figures through a provocative depiction of their underlying abstract shapes, as formal synecdoche, in which *pars pro toto* indicated a missing scheme to be recaptured by the imagination of the viewer, during liturgy and the act of worship.

How legitimate or how anachronistic would it be to consider iconoclastic art as expressive primitivism and an extreme reaction to naturalism within the continuum of Greco-Roman tradition? And how acceptable would it be to describe it as abstract figuration focused mainly on geometrical designs? Is it possible that iconoclasm prefigured Vassily Kandinsky's and Wilhelm Worringer's thesis about abstraction and empathy in art? The similarities are striking and can be seen in a much more obvious way in the attitude of the iconoclast towards the human body as pictorial space. In his famous brief essay, 'Byzantine Parallels,' Clement Greenberg, was one of the first art historians (Robert Byron was the first however [37]) to draw some analogies between such different movements: "While the Byzantines never renounced the representational in principle, it is possible to discern in iconoclasm, despite the fact that its motives were entirely religious, the echo of certain aesthetically felt objections to the figurative". Greenberg continues:

> Byzantine painting and mosaic moved from the beginning toward a vision of full color in which the role of light-and-dark contrast was radically diminished. In Gauguin and in late Impressionism, something similar had already begun to happen, and now, after Cubism, American painters like Newman, Rothko and Still seem almost to polemicise against value contrasts ... The new kind of modernist picture, like the Byzantine gold and glass mosaic, come forward to fill the space between itself and the spectator with its radiance. And it combines in similar fashion the monumentally decorative

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[36] Alain Besancon, *The Forbidden Image. An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, trans. by Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 125.

[37] Robert Byron considered the Byzantine art of the period as leading to what he called "the interpretanional painting in Europe" through El Greco. Robert Byron and David Talbot Rice, *The Birth of Western Painting* (New York: Hacker Art Books 1930 [1868]), p. 219.

with the pictorially emphatic, at the same time that it uses the most self-evident corporeal means to deny its own corporeality.[38]

The very materiality of the pictorial space in the icon became the reason for the extinction of the body and its substitution by the iconicity of verbal formations, addressing themselves to a society illiterate in its absolute majority. Whereas today word and image can exist in synergistic way, almost symbiotically, since society is more literate and more attuned to such collaborations, in eighth century Byzantium, whatever was written on the walls would have remained an indecipherable cryptonym which only an elite of scholars, priests and aristocrats would have access to. On the contrary, the representation of form was an open space for everybody to look at and establish a meaningful connection by visually reconstructing its 'prototype.'

After iconoclasm, the body regained its central position of anthropological contemplation as the most recognisable open space of reciprocal recognition. Based on the Platonic vision of *Timaeus* which used the metaphor of the body to describe cosmic equilibrium, the Byzantines ultimately retained their unshakable belief for a corporeal metaphor about the universe. Within their anthropology the confined space of the body, represented the closed cosmos which through 'analogy' and 'correspondence' maintained its unshakeable stability, while remaining an open social space for the creative imaginary.

Iconoclastic art can be called 'elemental' in contrast to the 'morphoplastic' one of mainstream Greco-Roman tradition. Such 'elemental' art was focused on geometrical shapes and linear abstractions arranged in mathematical analogies and organised within the abstract space of nonfigurative representation as the trace of kenotic presence. Abstraction meant absolute universality; essentially it meant the transition to a singular universe where the central matrix of all Christian forms, the Cross, could be used as a symbol of unity underlying all multiplicity, since it recapitulated all of them, as Jesus was recapitulating everything in him.[39]

We can also detect a form of conceptualism in iconoclasm, presupposing that shapes and drawings that have special significance for their viewers only as long as they possess an intentional structure. Conceptualism plus abstraction render this form of art elusive and indeterminate employing a visual inventory of ciphers and cryptograms with the explicit intention to extinguish all connection between icon and viewer. It is interesting that the theorist of contemporary modernism Wilhelm Worringer thought of the Byzantine art as

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[38] Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), pp. 168-69.
[39] Ephesians, 1:10.

occupying a "purely abstract habitus".[40] Also Wassili Kandinsky in his famous essay 'On the Spiritual in Art' attempted an interesting analysis of the Ravenna mosaics suggesting the idea of the underlying "great spiritual element" on the basis of his theory about anti-realistic art, and the needed new art-form based on "rhythm in painting, mathematical abstract construction the value placed upon the repetition of color-tones, the way colors are set in motion."[41] Within the architectural of a church with its brilliant mosaics and its glittering tessera, Kandinsky would have found a prefiguration of his own theory.

Trying to bring all these ideas together, I would like to recapitulate my thoughts on iconoclasm as following: i) iconoclasm was not simply religious but an aesthetic rebellion against naturalistic art per se; ii) during iconoclasm we detect a return to the elementary representation of Christian primitivism, in opposition to the classical Greco-Roman anthropomorphism; iii) iconoclasts perceived the body as non self-referential and therefore as an unreliable source of meaning, excluding it thus from any religious context; finally iv) iconoclasm found in the shape of the Cross the ultimate expression of the elliptic representation of the visible.

In these prepositions we may actually sense the extremely sophisticated level of Byzantine aesthetics and the complex problematics implemented in order to reconcile cultural traditions and religious metaphors. However, the end of iconoclasm led to an interesting compromise between both tendencies, the tendency to abstraction and the tendency to empathy. The distinction between visible physis and invisible hypostasis, which acquired the status of doctrinal formulation for the Orthodox Church after the 7th Ecumenical Synod, was a happy compromise between abstraction and figuration; in the euphoria of such compromise patriarch Photios could celebrate the triumph of the artist:

> Through art we see a lifelike imitation of her [the Virgin]. She looks with affection at the child, yet her expression is detached and distant towards the emotionless and supernatural child. She looks as though she might speak if one were to ask her how she could be both virgin and mother, for the painting makes her lips seem of real flesh, pressed together and still as in the sacraments; it is as if this is the stillness and the beauty of the original.[42]

In Photios' word we find rekindled the ancient visual aesthetics of Horace's *ut pictura poesis* [as is painting so is Poetry],[43] heralding a triumphant return of

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[40] Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy. A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997 [1908]), p. 104.

[41] Wassili Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art*, eds Kenneth C Lindsay and Peter Vergo (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), p. 154.

[42] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 248.

[43] Horace, *Ars Poetica*, verse 361.

artistic production to the expressive qualities of verisimilitude, expressionism and mimesis.

The stillness of cruciform abstraction fused together with the symmetry of naturalistic identification represent the magnificent Byzantine synthesis in the artistic space of the next centuries when the Amorian and Macedonian lavishly expressionistic neo-classicism was formed; probably herein lies and the Christian Sublime as illumined transfiguration of the human body which becomes the exemplar and the emblem of a realised eschatology in the late period of Byzantine art, especially of the Paleologean era. The human body gradually becomes the emblem not of the corruptible cosmos but of its ideational completeness, as expressed and crystallised by the metaphors and the conventions of a specific cultural formation. The divine darkness of the apophatic tradition rendered art redundant but not useless. Within the abstract configuration of artistic space the faithful could envisage their own ideal identity, the light of their own gaze being reflected back to their own historical existence as mirror to their actual reality.

It seems that after iconoclasm Byzantine artists were not afraid like their Muslim counterparts to continue the creative function of divinity or indeed to emulate previous artistic tradition; on the contrary the architectural space of the church created the best context for framing religious anthropology in intelligible schemata utilising the imaginary potentialities of form-making, transfiguring the actual material space into the experience of a paradoxical coexistence. The symbiosis of iconic and aniconic elements reconciling the unseen with the ability to be seen is probably the most significant legacy of Byzantium to contemporary art.