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### Religious Images through Protestant Eyes

Julia LaPlaca

*Calvin University*

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Religious Images through Protestant Eyes

Julia LaPlaca  
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The first thing I noticed on entering a Greek orthodox church for the first time was the color—red carpet, a bright blue domed ceiling, the yellowish gold behind the altar. And faces were everywhere—saints and apostles line the walls and encircled the dome. But the most arresting image was Christ in the *anastasis* pose. He lunges, active, yet immobile, with arms outstretched pulling Old Testament heroes out of the earth his white robe billowing behind him. I wasn't entirely comfortable. The smells and bells and dozens of images felt foreign and overwhelming. Yet as I began to study artist history, I realized that I actually like a lot of religious art—Grunewald's heart-wrenching crucifixion that opens up to reveal a marvelous resurrection, the quiet solemnity and beauty of icons, the palpable despair in Pietas from the early middle ages. I can understand why people would use these images as sources of devotion and comfort or aids in contemplation. However, the reformed protestant in me still protests against some images. I've seen some truly astounding and beautiful altarpieces, but I wonder, “Would I *really* want this in my church? And can we be reformed and use imagery?”

As it turns out, this question is a whole lot bigger than my limited experience. Questions and controversies concerning the use of images have plagued the church almost since its beginning. Rarely has the dissension been polite or pretty. St. John of Damascus passionately lamented against iconoclasts, “O audacious opinion, rebelling against God and refusing to perform his commands!”<sup>1</sup> Calvin just as passionately called men who defend icons “raving madmen.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the blatant history of dissension between iconophiles and iconoclasts represented by St. John of Damascus and John Calvin, Martin Luther and the modern ecumenical

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<sup>1</sup> St. John of Damascus *Three Treatises On the Divine Images*, trans. Andre Louth (Crestwood, New York St. Vladimir's university Press, 2003), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, John. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) vol. 1, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 102.

movement offer a more moderate view of imagery in the church that agrees with Protestant reformed theology.

In 726, the Byzantine emperor Leo III initiated a widespread outbreak of iconoclasm in the east. He thought religious images had devolved into idols. Claiming, “I am a king and priest,”<sup>3</sup> he took matters into his own hands and declared iconoclasm the official doctrine of the empire in 730. *Iconoclasm* literally translates “image breaker.” It’s an appropriate title: iconoclasm often involves cruel destruction. After Leo’s decree, riots broke out in Constantinople to protest the demolition. St. John of Damascus, a monk, rose up against Leo to defend iconophiles, “image lovers.” He wrote three treatises addressing the charges of iconoclasts, outlining the reasons behind the use of images, and arguing their importance in worship.

The most serious charge against iconophiles is the breaking of the second commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.”<sup>4</sup> Early in his first treaty, St. John clarified the distinction between veneration and idolatry.<sup>5</sup> Veneration, or *timetike proskynesis*, suggests a bowing down to show honor. The practice agrees with biblical teaching. He mentions several Old Testament examples of veneration: Jacob venerated Esau, Abraham venerated the sons of Emmor, the people of Israel venerated the Ark of the Covenant. *Laitria* is the veneration directed at icons portraying Christ.

Icons are “designed to manifest or point to what is hidden”<sup>6</sup> and “present theology, history, art, and spirituality in color, expressions, lines. They are a window on heaven and on

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<sup>3</sup> Vlassios, Pheidas, “The ecumenicity of the Seventh Ecumenical Council” in in *Icons: Windows on Eternity*, ed. Gennadios Limouris (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 20:4-5.

<sup>5</sup> St. John of Damascus, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Dragas, George “St. John Damascene’s Teaching about the Holy Icons,” in *Icons: Windows on Eternity*, 67.

eternity.”<sup>7</sup> No Eastern Orthodox thinker would suggest icons themselves become an object of worship but consider them, like preaching and the sacraments, another way to respond to Christ. The figures in icons are purposefully representational and make no attempt to look like Christ. Iconographers act like priests, “introducing no personal or emotional content.” They help the viewer “lift his soul to the blessedness of God.”<sup>8</sup>

St. John believed that we are material people who benefit from material reminders. He compared icons to the stones of remembrance God instructed the Israelites to erect so that they could remind themselves and their children of what the Lord had done for them.<sup>9</sup>

How therefore shall we not depict in images what Christ our God endured for our salvation and his miracles, so that, when my son asks me, what is this? I shall say that God the Word became human and through him not only did Israel cross over the Jordan, but our whole nature was restored to ancient blessedness.<sup>10</sup>

Iconoclasts also challenged images on the basis of God’s invisible nature, quoting 1 Timothy 1:17, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, *invisible*, the only God be honor and glory forever.” St. John agreed it would be ridiculous to create something that cannot be seen, but then he moves to his central argument—the incarnation. “Therefore,” he argues, “I am emboldened to depict the invisible God, not as invisible but as he became visible for our sake, by participation in flesh and blood.”<sup>11</sup> God became man—tangible, material, visible.

For iconophiles, to deny images was to deny the incarnation. In an illustration of Psalm 21, iconophiles likened iconoclasts to the Pharisees and Romans who tortured Christ on the cross. Christ hangs on the cross while two soldiers jab spears at him and offer him sour wine. In

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<sup>7</sup> Limouris, introduction ix.

<sup>8</sup> Cooper, David J. C. “The Theology of Image” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35, (1982) Meeter Center. pp 224, 225

<sup>9</sup> Joshua 4:4-7.

<sup>10</sup> St. John of Damascus, 18.

<sup>11</sup> St. John of Damascus, 4.

the foreground, two named iconoclasts “employ a whitewash-soaked sponge to obliterate an icon of Christ.”<sup>12</sup> The visual parallel between Christ’s crucifiers and the iconoclasts is unmistakable.

But putting the nasty propaganda aside, as Christians we confidently believe Christ has issued a new covenant, a covenant where God unveiled his glory.<sup>13</sup> Our salvation came though God made *flesh*. So St. John declares, “I reverence the rest of matter and hold in respect that through which my salvation came, because it is filled with divine energy and grace.”<sup>14</sup> Because Christ became human, all of matter has been charged with “divine energy and grace.” He takes the argument farther and points out if we throw away images we might as well throw out the sacraments—because they too, are physical representations. The incarnation shows that our physicality matters to God. So we can venerate the symbols and prototypes of our salvation without fear of worshiping the matter.

The Seventh—and last—Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787 condemned Leo III’s reforms and confirmed the use of images. However, images in the Western church developed differently from the way they did in the East. Icons in the Eastern Orthodox Church were made according to a strict theological tradition—lines, colors, form, and subject matter never vary greatly from piece to piece. In the West, two things happened. First images began to be seen as carrying mystical power rather than merely as devotional tools; crucifixes and small devotional pieces were treated as talismans against evil, and larger pieces became shrine-like destinations for pilgrims. Second, humanism crept into religious art as Europe came close to the Renaissance.

Once a monastery in Conques, France, stole a reliquary of St. Faith from a neighboring monastery. One of the monks claimed St. Faith called to him to rescue her. So he got up and stole

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<sup>12</sup> Michael W. Cothorn and Marylyn Stockstad, *Art History* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2011), 246.

<sup>13</sup> St. John of Damascus, 31.

<sup>14</sup> St. John of Damascus, 29.

her relic, calling it a “holy theft.” The rumors about the miraculous power of the relic brought many pilgrims to Conques. “Over subsequent centuries, jewels, cameos, and other gifts added by pilgrims enhanced the splendor of the statue.”<sup>15</sup> This “holy theft” shows how the church used images to exploit the superstitions of people and garner more power, clout, and revenue.

Western art also became increasingly humanistic and sensual. Craftsmen began to form a new humanistic identity—the artist. Religious art often became a place to study anatomy and promote an artist’s personal ideals rather than promote devotion to God. Foquet’s “Nursing Virgin Mary,” is a good example. The model only agreed to sit for the painting if “her breasts be shown completely naked and that nipples be emphasized.”<sup>16</sup> The painting with its unearthly reds, blues, purples, and a rather alien-like mother of Christ certainly doesn’t encourage religious contemplation.

So it is little wonder that when John Calvin and the other reformers emerged with their fiery cries of *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, a new kind of iconoclasm emerged. Calvin correctly charged the Church with misusing images, and even the Eastern Orthodox Church would have agreed with him.<sup>17</sup> But Calvin believed we should get rid of all images in churches—*completely*—because they lead to idolatry, are unnecessary in worship, and tarnish God’s glory.

In his discussion of images in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin quoted 1 John 5:21, “Dear, children keep yourselves from idols.” For Calvin, there was no difference between veneration and idolatry.

Adoration promptly follows upon this sort of fancy; for when men thought they gazed upon God in images, they also worshiped him in them . . . Therefore when you prostrate

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<sup>15</sup> Cothorn, 462.

<sup>16</sup> Qtd in Cooper, 226.

<sup>17</sup> Cooper, 227.

yourself in veneration, representing to your-self in an image either of god or creature, you are already ensnared in some superstition.<sup>18</sup>

Calvin acknowledged the power of imagery. He too referred to the Old Testament to prove his point. He explained that when the Israelites worshipped the golden calf, they idolatrously thought they were worshipping Yahweh.<sup>19</sup> For Calvin, veneration equaled worship. “There is no difference whether they simply worship an idol, or God in the idol. It is always idolatry when divine honors are bestowed upon an idol, under whatever pretext this is done.”<sup>20</sup>

Calvin also emphasized that images are unnecessary in worship because God is perfectly capable of making himself known through the preaching of his Word, baptism, and communion—physical symbols of the Word. “By these our eyes ought to be more steadily fixed, and more vividly impressed, than to require the aid of any images which the wit of man may devise.”<sup>21</sup> Christ should be our one-and-only mediator, we don’t need images to connect us with the divine; this occurs through faith in the spirit. Calvin reminded his readers that the early, purer church did not use images. Later images were used to teach the illiterate, but even this Calvin dubbed a poor excuse.<sup>22</sup>

Images, because they are merely physical, also tarnish God’s glory.<sup>23</sup> Calvin believed God is too big to put into any visual box. The reformers often cited John 4: 23-24: “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth.” God is Spirit, so we should worship him in spirit and not in the flesh.

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<sup>18</sup> *Institutes*, vol. 1, 109.

<sup>19</sup> Exodus 32.

<sup>20</sup> *Institutes* vol.1, 109.

<sup>21</sup> *Institutes* vol. 1, 112.

<sup>22</sup> *Institutes* vol. 1, 106.

<sup>23</sup> *Institutes* vol. 1, 112.



To be fair, Calvin himself thought images *outside* the church were acceptable—somewhat frivolous—but not wrong; he also didn’t recommend violent destruction of images.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes there were healthy incidents of iconoclasm, when a community decided together to cleanse their worship places and return to a more Christ- and Word-centered worship.<sup>25</sup> But whether the reformers wanted it or not, their teachings did prompt violent iconoclasm.

In 1566 an especially foul wave of iconoclasm, spurred by Calvinist preaching, swept through the Netherlands.<sup>26</sup> Flemish engraver Franz Hogenberg depicted a scene from one of the riots. The engraving shows us the inside of a Catholic cathedral. Men heave down statues with ropes while others climb up ladders to smash stained glass windows. Several dogs run around the courtyard, symbolizing the profaning of the images Catholics held to be holy. Iconoclasts were known even to feed the consecrated host to their dogs.

Today, many Protestants still harbor uneasiness when it comes to religious images and for good reason. Images are powerful and can easily be abused and misused. But does this mean we should keep our puritanical, white-washed walls, and hang up banners with text only? Most theologians would answer no. “Simplicity has too often been an excuse for visual barrenness, and the gifts of our artists have been scorned.”<sup>27</sup> Images, color, and form can add theological and aesthetic depth to our worship. But images still seem to rub Protestants the wrong way. Can we be reformed Protestants and still use images in our worship? Martin Luther and the modern ecumenical movement provide an affirmative answer. Luther voiced a theology that seeks to

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<sup>24</sup> *Institutes* book 1, 112.

<sup>25</sup> Van Asselst, Willem J. “The Prohibitions of Images and Protestant Identity” in *Iconoclasm and Iconoclasm: Struggle for Religious Identity*, eds. Willem van Asselt et al, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV), 308.

<sup>26</sup> Eire, Carlos. “Dutch Calvinist Iconoclasm 1566” *The AdHoc Imagea dn Text Database on the History of Christianity*, Yale Divinity Library <http://divdl.library.yale.edu/dl/OneItem.aspx?qc=AdHoc&q=3104> (accessed 24, April 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Boonstra, Harry “Of images and Images Breakers” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 32, no. 2 (1997) Meeter Center, 431.

thoughtfully control what and how images are used. Today, believers from Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches have tried to come to an understanding and reach some level of agreement about this historically volatile subject.

In many ways Martin Luther agreed with Calvin; many western religious images had ceased to benefit the church. But Luther didn't recommend they be disposed of altogether. For Luther and all the reformers, Christ, the incarnate God, and his redeeming work had to remain central in worship.<sup>28</sup> But Luther believed we are visual people and would create images of Christ in our hearts. He explained,

Of this I am certain, that God desires to have his works heard and read, especially the passion of our Lord. But it is impossible for me to hear and bear it in mind without fanning mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as the reflection of my face naturally appears in the water look into it. If it is not a sin but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes?<sup>29</sup>

Luther referred to the same Old Testament passage about memorial stones St. John used in his treatise [grammatically confusing: Luther argues or St. John's treatise argues? Better: Referencing the same passage about memorial stones that St. John used in his treatise, Luther argued] to argue that God encourages us to use physical objects as memorials. For Luther, images were a matter of Christian freedom.<sup>30</sup> If they helped believers meditate and remember then images were acceptable. Luther concluded, “Then my images breakers must also let me keep, wear, and look at a crucifix . . . as long as I do not worship them.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Blancy “Protestantism and the Seventh Ecumenical Council,” in *Icons: Windows on Eternity*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> Luther, Martin. *Against the heavenly prophets in the matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525) excerpted from Luther Works Volume 40 Church and Ministry II, <http://www.angelfire.com/poetry/luther/temporary/againsten.html> (Accessed April 24, 2013.) 99-100.

<sup>30</sup> Van Asselt, 302.

<sup>31</sup> Luther, Martin, 88.

Luther condoned images, but he believed people should be taught how to use them correctly. In his sermon “The True and False Views of Christ’s Sufferings,” Luther lists improper meditations on Christ passion. For example, Luther condemned those who “decorate themselves with pictures and booklets, with letters and crucifixes” in order to “protect themselves against the perils of . . . all dangers.”<sup>32</sup> Luther went on, “In this way the suffering of Christ is to work in them an absence of suffering, which is contrary to its nature and character.”<sup>33</sup> Meditation of Christ’s suffering is not a way to escape suffering.

Luther also claimed it is wrong to merely pity Christ. He quoted Luke 23:28, in which Christ commands the women, “Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children.” Christ was in control at the cross; we should not pity him as the victim, but instead rightly meditate on God’s severity toward sin. Luther explained, “They mediate on the passion of Christ aright, who so view Christ that they become terror stricken . . . this . . . feeling should spring forth so that you see the severe wrath and unchangeable earnestness of God in regard to sin and sinners.”<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, meditation of Christ’s suffering reminds the believer that it is *his* sin that put Christ on the cross. Luther wrote, “You [must] deeply believe and never doubt the least, that you are the one who martyred Christ.”<sup>35</sup> Luther took the argument a step farther: we should try to identify with images of Christ. “You must become like the picture and sufferings of Christ, be it realized in life or in Hell.”<sup>36</sup> In order to be redeemed, the believer must come to grips with the true horror of his sin—this will happen in his life or after death— and in response throw himself

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<sup>32</sup>Luther, Martin “True and the false views of Christ’s sufferings Sermons of Martin Luther” (1519) excerpted from *The Sermons of Martin Luther, vol. II*, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/luther/chrsuff.htm> (accessed 24 April, 2013), 184.

<sup>33</sup> Luther, “Christ’s Suffering,” 184.

<sup>34</sup> Luther, “Christ’s Suffering” 185.

<sup>35</sup> Luther, “Christ’s Suffering” 185-86.

<sup>36</sup> Luther, “Christ’s Suffering” 187.

on the mercy of Christ. Of course, the believer does none of this himself; only Christ can move a sinner’s heart to repentance.

Martin Luther gave Protestants a sort of middle ground—maintaining Calvin’s caution, yet still allowing the proper use of images. The modern ecumenical movement provides another way of looking at images. Instead of finding a place in the middle, we can instead focus on the areas we share in common with our Catholic and Orthodox brothers and sisters. Surprisingly, when it comes to images, we may not be as different as we think.

In 1897, the World Council of Churches published a collection of essays, *Icons: Windows on Eternity*, with pieces from theologians, artists, iconographers, and historians all commenting on religious imagery in commemoration of the 1200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council.<sup>37</sup> Emilio Castro, a South American pastor and member of the World Council of Churches, said the book illustrates a “reciprocal learning” occurring among churches.<sup>38</sup> He said, “In the ecumenical exercise we are reopening polemics, but also learning to respect the differences, correcting each other and growing together in faith.”<sup>39</sup> This is just the kind of attitude the church needs to adopt in order to heal some of the long and ugly rifts in its history; the struggle over imagery in worship is a case in point. Protestants, the Orthodox, and Catholics can inspire each other if they are willing to learn and listen.

One of the essays in the collection, written by ecumenicist Alain Blancy, offers helpful insights on what it means to be reformed and to use images in worship. Blancy pointed out that, for the reformers, worship only needs to preach and teach the work of Christ, and things like

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<sup>37</sup> Limouris, ix.

<sup>38</sup> Limouris, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Limouris, 6.

images are non-essentials.<sup>40</sup> However, Blancy admitted that images are essential in our understanding of the incarnation:

To rule out the possibility of necessity of the icon is to deny or reject the two natures of Christ . . . Better still, in representing what is of the earth we are also representing one who is heavenly – using the visible to represent the invisible—and by giving access to the one we are opening up the approach to the other. The crucified Jesus is th is the risen Christ and likewise the risen Christ is still marked by the stigmata of the cross.”<sup>41</sup>

Blancy believed images can contribute to reformed worship. The incarnation is not a sacrament, but a hypostatic union we have with Christ—it’s the foundation of our faith.<sup>42</sup> Like St. John, Blancy believed icons and imagery can help us connect with God.

Blancy offered three conditions for a reformed theology of icons. First, icons must remain true to their purpose: “to express what is central to the faith—the person and world of Christ”<sup>43</sup> and “to . . . produce the communication and communion of believers with their Lord.”<sup>44</sup> We don’t have to worry about idolatry if we remember what the icon is—a representation and symbol.

Blancy also confronted the Protestant’s tension between depicting Christ in glory and Christ crucified. The Christ who died on earth is not the same Christ who was resurrected and reigns in glory—something changed. Is it right to portray a dying Christ now that He is risen? Blancy asked,

Is it so impossible to give essential unity to what time separates in history? I think not – on the one condition that the means must be kept available for overcoming the tension . . . while still respecting time and history. These means are the word and spirit.<sup>45</sup>

The same Word (Christ) and Spirit brought about Christ’s transformation; this same Word and Spirit enlivens our worship and meditation today. When you come right down to it, Christ does it

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<sup>40</sup> Blancy, 37.

<sup>41</sup> Blancy, 40.

<sup>42</sup> Blancy, 40.

<sup>43</sup> Blancy, 41.

<sup>44</sup> Blancy, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Blancy, 43.

all. As Christians, we trace this Word and Spirit wherever we see it represented—in images, in our fellow believers (who bear the image of Christ), in the sacraments, and in theology. The Word and Spirit connect the earthly and glorified Christ; they are also his “successors” on earth.<sup>46</sup>

Lastly Blancy addressed the Protestant’s emphasis on the Word. Protestants tend to say images come secondary to the Word. However, the Word is just as susceptible to misuse as an image. In his article “The Theology of Image,” David Cooper explained this problem in terms of modern protestant reaching:

It is historically ironic that Calvin’s rejection of self-seeking artists . . . , in favor of the pure ‘Word,’ has now issued a parallel degeneration of the verbal medium. Modern protestant preaching, as ‘entertainment,’ with its emphasis on style, persuasive power, emotional impact and the so called charisma of the individual preacher is as distracting in relation to the gospel as the art is was intended to replace.<sup>47</sup>

In our broken world, we see how images *and* can words pervert the gospel. However, God values both words and images. Perhaps we would do best to redeem both and offer both to Christ. Maybe sermons should use more pictures and we should use icons as visual sermons; after all, words and images share the same purpose—to communicate God’s work.<sup>48</sup>

This year during my church’s Good Friday service, we watched a PowerPoint presentation during the scripture readings of the passion. Most of the slides were photographs of life-size statuary from *Sacro Monte di Varallo*, portraying scenes from the passion. Despite their bright colors and high emotive quality, the visuals were not distracting. Rather, the pictures reinforced the scripture being read, and the words we heard gave substance to the pictures. This combination made for a deeply moving service. When done in a controlled and

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<sup>46</sup> Blancy, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Cooper, 237.

<sup>48</sup> Blancy 45.

thoughtful way, so called "Catholic" or "Orthodox" images can contribute immensely to Reformed worship.

However, it's taken years of dissension for the church to reach a time when it felt ready to converse about our divisions. No side is completely innocent. Iconophiles have credulously slipped into superstition over their images or let them devolve into something humanistic. Iconoclasts have been unwantedly destructive and robbed themselves of visual richness in their worship. From St. John to Calvin to today, the debate continues.

We live in an increasingly visual culture. We need the ability to see with St. John the importance of images and with John Calvin recognize that images can easily lead us astray. Now is the time for us to ask with Luther, "What are the right ways to use images?" and then implement those right ways in our worship. As we seek interchurch unity, we can listen and learn with members from other branches of the faith about how images can help us concentrate on Christ and rejoice in the fact that we serve a God who, in his great love, became visible for us.

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