

Icons and the Eastern Orthodox Claim to Continuity with the Early Church

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Introduction

The Eastern Orthodox claim that their church has an "unbroken" history back to the Apostles.¹ It's my object here to briefly examine that claim of continuity with particular reference to the early church's views on icons. Eastern Orthodoxy self-consciously makes icons a central part of their liturgy and tradition.² So, is the doctrine and practice of Eastern Orthodoxy today, with the prominent position it gives icons, really inherited from the early

¹ For example, "The Orthodox Church of today can trace its history back to the New Testament Church in unbroken continuity."
(http://www.orthodoxphotos.com/readings/Orthodox_Church/origin.shtml)

² "That Orthodox Christians give a very special place to the Holy Icons is hard to miss. Our churches, homes, and even places of business are filled with them, often outside as well as in. Upon entering a church and before prayers at home, Orthodox Christians generally perform bows from the waist¹ and kiss the icons in reverence. During the worship services in an Orthodox Church, the Priest frequently incenses the icons and the worshipers frequently bow and even prostrate toward them. . . . [F]or Orthodox Christians icons are central to the Christian Faith."
(<http://www.orthodoxanswers.org/defenseofholyicons.>)

church? Icons are more central to the Eastern Orthodox than for Roman Catholics. Further, Roman Catholics have developed a doctrine of a Holy Spirit led development of the church and its traditions which allows it to defend itself against charges of having departed from the Apostolic Tradition. A Roman Catholic may freely admit that the early church didn't look much like they do today but defend the development of their liturgy by insisting that God guided it. But because Eastern Orthodoxy stakes its claim to legitimacy on "unbroken continuity" with the early church, any proof of significant departure of the Orthodox from the practices of the early church would undermine their claim. To defend their current prominent use of icons, the Orthodox have to assert that their iconography goes back to the Apostles. Indeed, they insist that Luke himself made the first icon (of Mary).

Icons and the History of the Church

Early Jewish View on Icons

What does history say about this claim? Do the icons go back to the earliest church? First of all, many of the early Christians were Jews. Second-Temple Jews had very strict principles against representing God in images and severe restrictions against images of anything, for any reason. "Whereas a Jew was permitted to violate

the ordinances of the Torah under threat of death, an exception was made of idolatry, immorality and bloodshed, idolatry ranking first in importance.”³ The Talmud had detailed rules on what objects with images, and what kinds of images, that a Jew could have (in any context, for any reason). The Talmud taught, “Whosoever recognizes idols has denied the entire Torah; and whosoever denies idols has recognized the entire Torah” (*Sifre*, Deut. 54 and parallel passages).⁴

Here, we encounter one of the difficulties of this debate: Orthodox defenders will categorically deny that their icons can be referred to as “idols” and so historical references, such as the Talmud, which refer to “idols”, they say, are inapplicable. That is, they would say that references to “idols” are to some other category of images than are the “icons” they claim the New Testament church adopted immediately upon inception and which they have faithfully preserved. But the Jewish polemic of the period was to pour scorn on idolatry including by the use of derogatory names.

Although the Jews were forbidden in general to mock at anything holy, it was a merit to deride idols (Meg. 25b), and Akiba decreed that the names of the gods be changed

³ http://www.come-and-hear.com/zarah/zarah_0.html

⁴ “WORSHIP, IDOL,” *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1906, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/15027-worship-idol>.

into derogatory names (Sifre, Deut. 61, end, *et passim*). Thus, Baal-zebub (II Kings i. 2, 6) is called Beel-zebul (בעל זבול = "*dominus stercoris*") in Matt. xii. 24, 27, and elsewhere, and the word with which the Talmud designates sacrifice to idols (זבול; Yer. Ber. 13b) literally means "to manure." The Hellenistic Jews also observed this custom, so that they applied the term εἰδωλόθυτος to what the Gentiles called ἐρίθυτος (Deissmann, "Die Hellenisierung des Semitischen Monotheismus," Leipsic, 5, 1903).⁵

Early Church View of Icons

The commitment of second-temple Judaism to build a "fence" around the Second Commandment was such that Jews of the period protested the Roman flags with images and the profile of Caesar on the coins. Therefore, we can surmise that had the early church immediately adopted the use of icons in their meetings, there would have been vigorous denunciations from the traditional Jews. Given the heated controversy over circumcision and eating ceremonially unclean meat, surely an innovation involving something Talmudic Judaism felt so strongly about as imagery in worship would have caused a heated debate that would have left some records.

⁵ Ibid.

Furthermore, early Christians (and sometimes Jews) were commonly called “atheists” by the Romans.⁶ They did so because the Christians (and Jews) did not have any images in their homes or churches and hence assumed that they had no gods at all. Polycarp (c. 156) was asked by the Romans to say, “away with the atheist”, by which the Romans meant to include the Christians.⁷ The Romans so conflated visible imagery with theism they assumed those without images were atheists. Hence, had the early church abounded in iconography, as Eastern Orthodoxy suggests they did, it is unlikely the Romans would have launched that particular criticism. Why would the Roman proconsul assume Polycarp is an “atheist” if his home and meeting places had images for worship or veneration?

The pagan philosopher and critic of Christianity Celsus made Christian rejection of all images a point of criticism, claiming that Greek philosophers understood that the images were not the gods themselves. According to Celsus, the Greek worship of the gods did not terminate on the physical object or icon, but through them passed into the actual god, never resting on the mere medium or icon. The image was a symbol for the god and not the god per se; honoring the symbol was therefore a way of honoring the god. This

⁶ “The ancient world regarded the Jews as atheists because of their refusal to worship visible gods. ‘Whosoever denies idols is called a Jew’ (Meg. 13a, b).” (Ibid.)

⁷ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Chapter 9.

would later become exactly the theological defense of the veneration of icons in Eastern Orthodoxy. The Eastern Orthodox now insist that their bowing to icons is not idolatry because the honor they give the image is conveyed to God or the saint the icon represents.⁸

Origin (184-254) responded to Celsus by admitting that Christians used no images; he mocked the notion that images were helpful in worship, and, citing the Second Commandment wrote, “It is in consideration of these and many other such commands, that they [Christians] not only avoid temples, altars, and images, but are

⁸ For example, see “Honoring God’s Work”, Orthodox Research Institute, http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/articles/liturgics/cozby_honoring_God.htm.

They will often quote Basil, " . . . because the honor paid to the image passes on to the prototype. " (Basil of Caesarea, c. 330-379.) However, it is not at all clear here that Basil has in mind any reference to physical images in worship or implying that the church by his time used any such images. He is rather making a highly theological argument for the Trinity. Here is the frequently quoted phrase in context:

So that according to the distinction of Persons, both are one and one, and according to the community of Nature, one. How, then, if one and one, are there not two Gods? Because we speak of a king, and of the king's image, and not of two kings. The majesty is not cloven in two, nor the glory divided. The sovereignty and authority over us is one, and so the doxology ascribed by us is not plural but one; because the honour paid to the image passes on to the prototype. Now what in the one case the image is by reason of imitation, that in the other case the Son is by nature; and as in works of art the likeness is dependent on the form, so in the case of the divine and uncompounded nature the union consists in the communion of the Godhead. (Basil, “The Holy Spirit” (*De Spiritu Sancto*), 18, 45.)

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3203.htm>.

ready to suffer death when it is necessary, rather than debase by any such impiety the conception *which they have of the Most High God.*"⁹

The Difference between Art and Icon

We should differentiate between art and icons. Eastern Orthodox will sometimes make that distinction themselves. "Contrary to popular, non-Orthodox belief, icons are not art."¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria (c.150 – c. 215) wrote, "Works of art cannot then be sacred and divine."¹¹ That being the case then, the discovery of early Christian art does not mean the discovery of early Christian iconography. By "icons" I am specifically referring to religious symbols to which respect is paid in congregational worship.

I do not here want to get into the discussion of whether there is a legitimate difference between worship (*latría*) and "veneration" (*dulia*), but only to note that it is giving veneration to an image that constitutes the use of icons, as the Eastern Orthodox practice it, not the mere presence of images which may only be decoration. Therefore, the existence of decorations and imagery at catacombs

⁹ Origin, *Contra Celsus*, Book VII, Chapter 64.

¹⁰ All Saints of Alaska Orthodox Church, <http://www.allsaintsofalaska.ca/index.php/the-orthodox-church/65-about-icons>.

¹¹ Translated by Rev. William Wilson, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, Clement of Alexandria, Book VII, Chapter V.

does not necessarily prove that such images were used as icons. Opposition to icons does not necessarily suggest opposition to art or symbolism. At the Synod of Elvira (c. 305), as we will see, Christians were not necessarily discouraged from art, even of Biblical or Christian subjects, but were discouraged to have art in contexts that would tempt them to use it in worship.

While there is one small church in Syria (Dura-Europas) with decorations and the catacombs contained some early Christian art, there is no evidence from the early church of using decorations as "icons" (objects of "veneration"). That is, even if we granted the Orthodox distinction between “veneration” and “worship” and between “icons” and “idols,” even Orthodox apologists are not able to put forward an incontrovertible example of the early church “venerating icons.” Some Eastern Orthodox apologists for icons make much of Dura-Europas and now claim that archeology has proven the widespread use of icons in the early church.¹² However, the fact that one (or a few), small church(es) has (have) been found with images does not constitute evidence of anything other than an

¹² For example, Eastern Orthodox apologist David Withun consistently calls the decorations found at Dura Europas “icons.” He writes, “The very presence of these icons at all [at *Dura Europas*] in fact attests to their veneration.” Further, he assumes that Dura Europas is representative of early church buildings generally. On that basis, he concludes, “we’ve established that icons were present in the early Church.” (David Withun, *Pious Fabrications*, “A Defense of the Holy Icons”, December 11, 2010, <http://www.piousfabrications.com/2010/12/defense-of-holy-icons.html>.)

exception, an exception of allowing decorations, not even a clear exception of iconography.

Later Church Opposition to Icons

Of more substantial evidence is the explicit, written teachings of leaders of the early church. A synod of the church, meeting in Elvira, Spain about the year 305, appears to build a fence against encroaching idolatry by restricting even art in church buildings. Canon 36 of the Council of Elvira states, “Pictures are not to be placed in churches, so that they do not become objects of worship and adoration.” Note the implicit distinction between mere decorations (“pictures”) on the one hand, and “objects of worship and adoration” on the other. The prohibition was against any images in the church buildings to forestall the danger of those images becoming icons. Hence, the 19 bishops at the Synod of Elvira were objecting to the presence of art in a church because of the temptation it presented; for example, they would object to our stained glass, saying that it had the potential to become idolatrous. Hence they appear to be stricter at prohibiting decorations in churches than most modern evangelicals would be because they were aware of the potential for the decorations to become involved with worship. That it appears to be a warning against decorations so that they do not potentially become “objects of worship” suggests that there were no such icons in the early church by AD 305.

About the year 327 the early church historian Eusebius (c. AD 263 – 339), who lived in Jerusalem, received a letter from the emperor's sister, Constantia, asking him for a picture of Christ. Eusebius replied that he knew that such pictures existed in the marketplaces but he didn't believe that the people who make such things were Christians. He took it for granted that only pagan artists would make such representations. Eusebius wrote that even the incarnate Christ cannot appear in an image, for:

The flesh which He put on for our sake . . . was mingled with the glory of His divinity so that the mortal part was swallowed up by Life. . . . This was the splendor that Christ revealed in the transfiguration and which cannot be captured in human art. To depict purely the human form of Christ before its transformation, on the other hand, is to break the commandment of God and to fall into pagan error.¹³

This reasoning would later be contradicted by John of Damascus (c. 675 –749), likely the most important theologian of iconography. My point here isn't to referee the validity of their competing theologies

¹³ David M. Gwynn, *From Iconoclasm to Arianism: The Construction of Christian Tradition in the Iconoclast Controversy* [Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 47 (2007) 225–251], 227.

but to note that almost four centuries prior to John's defense of icons on the basis of the incarnation, Eusebius was making the opposite argument, to oppose images of Christ. For that he is deemed by some, like Jaroslav Pelikan, as "the father of iconoclasm."¹⁴ But such a title assumes that Eusebius was unusual or the innovator. While apparently later iconoclasts took up Eusebius' theology to oppose icons, Eusebius seems here only to be theologically defending a practice of excluding icons that had been assumed for the first few centuries of the church. A tradition, such as Catholicism, could handle this development by arguing that the church evolved under the direction of the Holy Spirit. But a tradition that stakes its claim on "unbroken continuity" must argue that Eusebius was in error; that he was a rare dissenting voice. But even that doesn't dismiss the historical evidence that Eusebius's argument (as well as Canon 36 of the Council of Elvira) constitutes. Even if one argues that Eusebius and Elvira were wrong and hold no authority, both show that, at least, significant leaders in the early church opposed icons.

Another prominent example is Epiphanius (inter 310–320 – 403), considered a "saint" in the Eastern Orthodox Church. He was Bishop of Salamis, in Cyprus. He wrote in the last section of Letter 51 (c. 394), to John, Bishop of Jerusalem:

¹⁴ Ibid., 243.

I went in to pray, and found there a curtain hanging on the doors of the said church, dyed and embroidered. It bore an image either of Christ or of one of the saints; I do not rightly remember whose the image was. Seeing this, and being loath that an image of a man should be hung up in Christ's church contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures, I tore it asunder and advised the custodians of the place to use it as a winding sheet for some poor person.

He goes on to tell John that such images are “contrary to our religion” and to instruct the presbyter of the church that such images are “an occasion of offense.”¹⁵ Hence, the archeological evidence

¹⁵ Epiphanius, Letter 51, chapter 9, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001051.htm>. Another letter from Epiphanius, to Emperor Theodosius, likewise has iconoclastic comments in it. There have been some questions raised about the authenticity of these letters, first raised by the “iconodules” when the iconoclasts cited Epiphanius for their cause. Ninth century iconodule Eastern Orthodox Patriarch Nicephorus (758-828) claimed that Epiphanius’ iconoclastic letters were forgeries and that opinion held sway for over 1,200 years until Karl Holl (1866-1926) challenged them in his important 1910 manuscript *Die handschriftliche Überlieferung des Epiphanius* (Gorgias Press, 2010). The questions do not appear to be text-based; that is, there are no copies of Letter 51 without the iconoclastic remarks. Steven Bigham is an Eastern Orthodox priest who has written a book making the case against Epiphanius’ apparent iconoclasm, *Epiphanius of Salamis, Doctor of Iconoclasm? Deconstruction of a Myth* (Patristic Theological Library), Orthodox Research Institute, 2008. According to Istvan M. Bugár, of the

gives us some examples of Christian imagery but only very rarely in church buildings. The actual writings of the early church leaders are strictly opposed to the dangers of iconography, even to the point of restricting decorations in churches for fear they would lead to use in worship. As yet, I've found no written source of an early church leader defending the use of images in church buildings or as part of corporate worship prior to the fifth century, much less advocating for the kind of iconography now practiced by the Eastern Orthodox. I have not found an Eastern Orthodox advocate for iconography able to cite a verifiable source supporting icons, the quote from Basil (above in footnote 8) notwithstanding.

When did the use of icons arise then? That's a much larger question but we can ascertain that they rose to acceptability sometime after the fourth century. Yet these images of Christ and other "saints" caused great controversy. The icons were a source of discontent which emerged in the eighth century (the 700s) as the bitter iconoclastic controversy. To maintain the position that the Eastern Orthodox practices have preserved an "unbroken continuity"

University of Debrecen, Hungary, "the overwhelming majority of twentieth century scholars" accepted Holl's conclusions about the debated letters and Epiphanius' iconoclasm. Bugár dissents. (http://unideb.academia.edu/IMBug%C3%A1r/Papers/1687867/_What_Did_Epiphanius_Write_to_Emperor_Theodosius_with_the_edition_of_the_text_in_an_appendix_). Without texts omitting the iconoclastic comments, there appear to be no reason to not accept them.

with the practices of the early church, they would need to show that it was the iconoclasts who were the innovators, seeking to take away the Church from the Apostolic Tradition, from the fifth to eighth centuries. I know of no grounds on which they could support such a case.

Icons and Pagan Practices

Rather, it appears that iconoclasm was the inherited position and the acceptance of icons was the innovation. In the east the emperor was the major force in the leadership of the church and for a century many of the emperors were iconoclastic. They believed that the images were idols and that they were associated with the idolatry Christianity had displaced. They believed that the representations of Christ, Mary, and the Apostles, clearly borrowed from pagan idols. In this instinct there was a measure of truth. The representations of Christ as the Almighty Lord on his judgment throne owed something to pictures of Zeus. Portraits of the Mother of God were not wholly independent of a pagan past of venerated mother-goddesses. In the popular mind the saints had come to fill a role that had been played by heroes and deities.¹⁶

¹⁶ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, (The Penguin History of the Church, 1993), 283.

The Seventh Ecumenical Council and Icons

In 726, the emperor Leo started a campaign to eliminate the icons. In 754 the first “Seventh Ecumenical Council” (often known as the Council of Hieria) convened near Constantinople. The 333 assembled bishops condemned the icons:

If anyone ventures to represent in human figures, by means of material colours, by reason of the incarnation, the substance or person (ousia or hypostasis) of the Word, which cannot be depicted, and does not rather confess that even after the Incarnation he [i.e., the Word] cannot be depicted, let him be anathema!¹⁷

However, there was a great deal of controversy over this council, with none of the five patriarchs attending. So there was a great struggle in the Eastern Church. For much of a century the icons were prohibited but eventually they were allowed back. The Empress Irene convened the “Second Council of Nicaea,” now known as the legitimate “Seventh Ecumenical Council” by the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church. The Council established the use of icons and relics, anathematizing iconoclasm in 787. That, I believe, marks the true birth of Eastern Orthodoxy.

¹⁷ Epitome of the Definition of the Iconoclastic Conciliabulum held in Constantinople, AD 754, Ninth Statement, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/icono-cncl754.asp>

Summary and Conclusion

We set out to determine the validity of the Eastern Orthodox claim that their church has an "unbroken" history back to the Apostles. We examined that claim of continuity with particular reference to the early church's views on icons since Eastern Orthodoxy self-consciously makes icons a central part of their liturgy and tradition. But by looking carefully at the history of icons its origin was not found in the early church. Indeed, even when some churches later used pictures, there is no evidence they were as objects of "veneration." Rather, we discovered the true birth of Eastern Orthodoxy arose only after the "Seventh Ecumenical Council" which established the use of icons and relics, anathematizing iconoclasm in 787. Hence, whatever other continuity there may have been with Eastern Orthodoxy and the early Christian church apparently was not in the use of icons in their worship.