

Iconoclasm and Iconophobia: Four Historical Case Studies

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Iconophobia, literally the fear of images, usually occurs in proportion to the powers attributed to images by their believers and attackers.¹ In the worst cases, these fears have led to, or coincide with, a cycle of violence that may involve the actual destruction of images (iconoclasm) and the actual destruction of human life. The distinction between the two activities is often blurred by the language we use: For instance, *purging* public spaces of the giant statues of Soviet leaders in the early 1990s



Fig 1 ‘Communist Icon is Uprooted in Bucharest’ – cranes lift a 25-foot high bronze statue of Lenin (after *New York Times*, March 6, 1990.
Photo: AP/Wide World Photos/Michel Euler)

resonates with the Stalinist *purges* of living people a generation before (fig. 1). The rhetoric of representation in such photographs of the subjugation and hanging of Lenin('s statue) in Romania in 1990, invokes a retaliation against the real man.² The sheer number of such public statues throughout the Soviet Union and its satellites provided many communities with this opportunity for revenge. We also speak of the *suppression* of imagery, as of popular uprisings; or the *eradication* of certain beliefs, subjects in art, and even whole tribes of people.

We are so used to such metonymies for violence that their power as speech acts may go unnoticed, yet their effect is to reify people. To quote Ann Kibbey: 'Although human beings and material objects may seem to us to be mutually exclusive categories, iconoclasm depended on a presumption of likeness between people and objects'.³ Recent events once more confirm that we have to take that danger very seriously.

Fuller semiotic analysis helps to understand the interconnectedness of acts of violence that were as apparently separate as those against living beings, and those against made objects. Most iconoclasm involves confusion between the image or sign (the painting or statue) and its referent (the actual subject – such as Jesus Christ), and a re-encoding of the signified (the meanings assigned to the sign and referent, such as 'Lamb of God' or 'Son of God'). Not surprisingly, Christian thought has been perturbed for centuries by the problematic relationship between original and imitation, as between Christ and a painted icon.⁴ It is well known to art historians that during a period Greek theologians called the Iconoclasm, many representations of God and the saints as men were destroyed or hidden away. In church interiors the cross replaced the human likeness of Jesus Christ, a sign that is a *synechdoche* for Christ crucified.⁵ It is less well-known that iconodules as well as 'idolaters' were persecuted.⁶

This situation was further problematized in western Europe in 1215, when the Roman Church confirmed belief in transubstantiation, that is the literal change of the bread and wine of the Eucharist into the body and blood of Christ. These physical man-made objects were thereby transposed from signs to actual parts of the referent (another kind of *synechdoche*). We might say they were transvalued.

First case study

I have selected four models from the history of art in western Europe. From the time of the crusades on, religion and politics became more and more closely intertwined. I begin with the Templars in France in the early 14th century, and the Lollards slightly later in England. Each group was accused of heresy, including the desecration of the Crucifix, which had become a favorite cult object, whether for public or private devotion. The Templars had installed Christian images in the mosque known as the Dome of the Rock. Yet some Templars may have been influenced by the Muslims among whom they had lived in the Holy Land, in that their trial testimony indicates that they regarded wooden sculptures of Christ on the cross as mere pieces of wood cut by human hand.⁷ The Capetian king of France who condemned the Templars in Paris may have been concerned about their temporal power as an inde-



2. Anonymous print, *Horribilia scelera ab Huguenotis in Gallijs perpetrata*, Catholic view of Protestant crowd violence in France, 16th c. (after Richard Verstegen, *Theatrum crudelitatum haereticorum nostri temporis*. Antwerp: A. Hubert, 1588. Photo: Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto)



3. Erhard Schön, *Klagede der armen verfolgten Götzen und Tempelbilder*, Scene of Iconoclasm, c. 1530, Germany (Photo: after Martin Warnke, ed., *Bildersturm. Die Zerstörung des Kunstwerks*. Reprint edition. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988)

pendent army, as much as his churchmen were concerned about heresy. The Lollards burned crucifixes to challenge their sanctity, but there was also a class element in their uprising. Members of both groups were tried and burned. In the case of the Templars, an additional charge was that their rituals were homosexual – itself a form of idolatry as argued by St Paul, since he claimed that in such relationships the adoration of a man was put above the worship of God (Romans 1: 22–8; Corinthians 6: 9–10).⁸ As Margaret Aston and Eamon Duffy have argued, fire was

used for purification by both sides.⁹ In these cases the iconoclast, codified as both idolater and living idol, suffered the same fate as material idols. Not only is the boundary between sign and referent confused (the Crucifix vs. Jesus Christ on the Cross), but also a living idol was seen to have supplanted the image of God, as if he usurped the role of referent. Thus icon and heretic became interchangeable. By 1530 and throughout the 16th century this exchange was being recorded in pro-Catholic and pro-Protestant engravings that illustrated acts of Protestant iconoclasm (figs 2 and 3).

Second case study

A tortuous series of semantic shifts that blurred the distinction between living and inanimate can be traced from Reformation iconoclasm in England, beginning in the reign of Henry VIII, to the British colonies in America, where they culminated in the burning of a Pequot settlement in 1637. Kibbey has linked the iconoclastic rhetoric of the New England Puritans, whether against Catholic icons, against the teachings of Anne Hutchinson, or against the native people of New England.¹⁰ The Puritans not only followed the Protestants in rejecting all the Catholic signs of Christ (including his presence in the host and wine), but they also rejected all ritual in their church services, including 'material shapes' such as kneeling.¹¹ Their meeting halls, such as one surviving from 1681 in Hingham, MA, had none of the architectural forms or furnishings of a church, except a simple pulpit. Like Calvin, the Puritans were disturbed by 'the shape of the idol's bodily members', which compelled the viewer to 'superstitious rites'. According to this dogma, only living Christians were made in the image of God, and there were no other legitimate images of Him.¹² The Puritans became obsessed with misshapen beings, determined to purge their communities of them. In creating their own social order, they came to regard Native Americans as sacrificial victims; Thomas Hooker, minister of the Hartford congregation, urged Captain Mason to genocide by preaching that 'they should be bread for us'. Kibbey posits a 'metonymic chain of prejudice' whereby 'bread' now signified, not the body of Christ, but Pequot bodies as material objects of ritual violence, giving the Puritans license to deliberately slaughter Pequot men, women and children. They then claimed that they were 'burning them up in the Fire of [God's] Wrath, and dunging the ground with their Flesh: it was the Lord's doings'.¹³

In the same year, and the same Puritan community, Anne Hutchinson was dubbed a whore of Babylon for her beliefs concerning 'the nature of man's present and future renewal in God's image'. She had persisted in a view, recently abandoned by John Cotton, that the Puritans had returned to Adam's original holiness by coming to the new Paradise of New England.¹⁴ Ironically it was Cotton who misrepresented her at her trials as dangerous to the new social order, and charged her with spreading disobedience, the 'filthie Sinne' of sexual misconduct, and, potentially, violence.¹⁵ Since she was pregnant, her sentence to exile was delayed until the birth. When Hutchinson's child was still-born the Puritans exhumed it to prove that it had horns and clawed feet.



4. Anonymous print, *Carnifex Maiestatis Regis Angliae*, Charles I beheaded, 1649 (Photo: London, The Mary Evans Picture Library)

There is a postscript. According to the *Los Angeles Times* of 2 December 2001, six pastors from the Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod, the second largest in the USA) called for the expulsion of the Rev. David Benke. They view his having participated in the 23 September interfaith memorial service at Yankee Stadium in New York as heresy, asserting that 'he participated in idolatry by participating with non-Christians' in praying for the victims of the September 11 attacks.

Very similar rhetoric to that of the New England Puritans in the 1630s surrounded the trial and execution of Charles I of England in 1649, and the Cromwellian campaigns against the figures represented in Catholic sculptures and paintings that followed. The king had to be reduced, by legal wrangling and verbal attacks from a ruler whose coronation rite had endowed him with the power to cure scrofula, to an ordinary body: his supposed Catholic idolatry was compounded by the fact that Henry VIII had claimed a new role for the monarchy, that of head of the Anglican Church. Charles was then a misfit, both heretic and idolater. Though the image in a popular pamphlet, showing a Cromwellian as 'the butcher of the King's Majesty of England' (*Carnifex Majestatis Regis Angliae*) holding the king's severed head may have been intended to shock, it could also be likened to Judith with the head of Holofernes (fig. 4).¹⁶ In continuity with the defamation and execution of the king, there followed an institutionalized and fairly systematic destruction of images in churches. A 'documentary' painting was made in 1657 by Thomas Johnson, and shows militia with pikes positioned on the window sills and in the galleries in order



5. Thomas Johnson, painting, *Canterbury Quire as in 1657*
(London, private collection.
Photo: Dean and Chapter of Canterbury)

to beat out all the stained glass they could reach (fig. 5).¹⁷ Contemporary descriptions of these campaigns evoke these icons of saints as if they were corporeal beings, thus curiously enough re-enacting their martyrdoms. Here is the Rev. Richard Culmer (known as Blue Dick) on the damage done to stained glass in Canterbury Cathedral by: 'A Minister being then on the top of the Citie ladder . . . with a whole pike in his hand ratling down *proud Becket's glassy bones*'.¹⁸ The troopers who carried out most of the destruction fought, he says, 'with the Cathedrall Gods'.¹⁹ Another eye-witness described them running their swords through the saints in a tapestry, as if through real men.

Third case study

In the French Revolution, the removal of the immense royal statues from Paris squares constituted iconoclasm because there too the anointed monarch (French *sacré*) had miracle-working powers. Processions and public ceremonies had centered on these bronzed monarchs, for instance around Louis XIV in the Place Vendôme, or around Louis XV in the square named for him (now the Place de la Concorde; fig. 6). Previous generations had invested great effort and pride in these monumental castings, and the effort it took to remove them was in proportion, as it also was in the case of the recent dismantling of monuments in the former Soviet bloc (figs 1 and 7).²⁰

Another form of Revolutionary iconoclasm was tied to character assassination.



6. Jacques Ange Gabriel, print, *Ceremonies observing a day of public peace in the Place Louis XV (Place de la Concorde)* (Paris, Musée Carnavalet.
Photo: © Photothèque des Musées de la Ville de Paris/Cliché: Degraces)



7. Anonymous print, *Overturning the Statue of Louis XV, 11 August 1792* (Paris, Musée Carnavalet.
Photo: © Photothèque des Musées de la Ville de Paris/Cliché: Trocaz)



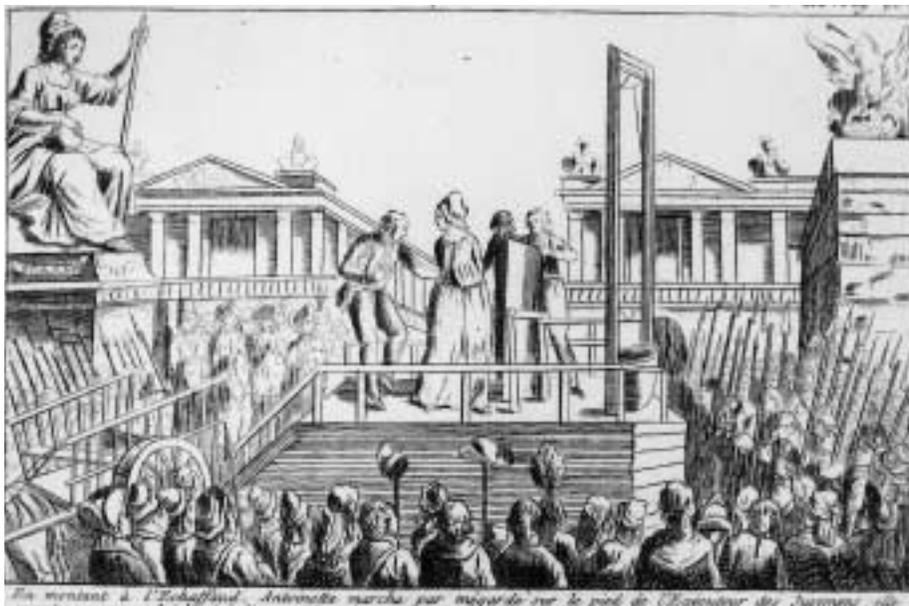
8. Anonymous print, *La Vie Privée*, Marie Antoinette with lady in waiting (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris)

The familiar charge of homosexuality was used against the queen (thus dubbed as adulterer as well as idolater). Circulated through prints, the pornographic image drained Marie-Antoinette of all regal presence, in marked contrast to the official court portraits; such base corporeality could not embody the realm (fig. 8).²¹ Thus her public image was destroyed along with the public images of the king. After this physical destruction of the king's statues, and the character assassination of his queen, the icon of the king was displaced by one of Liberty enthroned (fig. 9). It then became necessary to dispose of the physical bodies of these once-royal persons (the living referents of 'king and queen' had become empty signs). And so in January and October 1793 they were beheaded under the gaze of Liberty (fig. 10).²²

In the same year the General Council of the Commune of Paris issued a solemn order to remove the crowns from the 13th-century statues of kings on the façade of Notre-Dame Cathedral, to decapitate them, and to topple their bodies after the severed heads into the precinct below.²³ Palloy, the citizen who had contracted to demolish the Bastille, sent three of the heads, like guillotined trophies, to the municipalities surrounding Paris as an act of respect for their revolutionary roles. Contemporary by-passers alluded to the pile of bodies in front of Notre-Dame in animate terms, as a 'formless and monstrous mass' of stinking 'cadavers that might give rise to the plague'.²⁴ The stench according to others came from their use as a public latrine, a common mark of disrespect.²⁵ Louis David proposed to use this 'debris of the double tyranny of kings and priests' in the base of a giant figure of the French People personified by Hercules. That project abandoned, the fragments were carted away in 1796, and disappeared from view until 1977.²⁶



9. Anonymous print, Festival of Liberty, October, 1792. (*Revolution de Paris* #71)
(Photo: © Photothèque des Musées de la Ville de Paris/Cliché: Andreani)



10. Anonymous print, Marie-Antoinette at the Guillotine, 1793
(Paris, Musée Carnavalet. Photo: © Photothèque des Musées de la Ville de Paris/Cliché: Toumazet)



11. Group of nine kings' heads, limestone, from the gallery of kings in the west façade of Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris, c. 1230–40. (Paris, Musée National du Moyen Age et des Thermes de Cluny. Photo: Madeline Caviness)



12. Head of King David (#20) from the west façade of Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris (Musée National du Moyen Age et des Thermes de Cluny. Photo: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York; Musée du Moyen Age (Cluny), Paris, France; H. Lewandowski)



13. Detail of a king's head (#15) from the west façade of Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris (Musée National du Moyen Age et des Thermes de Cluny. Photo: © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York; Musée du Moyen Age (Cluny), Paris, France; R. G. Ojeda)



14. Bamiyan, Afghanistan, Buddha Cliff,
175 feet high, stone sculpture, 3rd–7th c.
(Photo: American Committee for South
Asian Art, University of Michigan)



15. Canterbury, Christ Church Cathedral
and Abbey hospital, 12th c.
(Photo: Madeline Caviness)

Fourth case study

In fact the heads of these statues had received ritual burial in the courtyard of a mansion far from the Cathedral, carefully stacked and all facing the same way – somewhat as they now appear in the Musée National du Moyen Age et des Thermes de Cluny (figs 11 and 12). The discovery of this mass grave in 1977 occasioned a commemorative volume entitled *Les rois retrouvés* (the rediscovered kings, not the rediscovered *statues* of the kings), with a chapter by François Giscard d’Estaing on the ‘Heurs et malheurs des rois de notre-dame’, and one on the ‘histoire d’un crime’ by Michel Fleury. The poignant photographs taken for Giscard d’Estaing, especially the close-up details, reveal haunting traumatized visages (fig. 13). The discovery of these heads runs counter to the denial of history evident in the complete sculpted figures in place on the façade of Notre-Dame, which were reinvented in the 19th century.



16 and 17. Khtskonk (Bes Kilise), St Sargis Monastery, 11th c., state in 1915, and Khtskonk, St Sargis Monastery, 11th c., view after 20th c. destruction
(Photos: Università di Roma I 'La Sapienza', Rome)



Only Alain Erlande-Brandenburg's contribution to the *rois retrouvés* volume recalls to the reader that the subject here is sculpture, not kings. As a museum curator, he was responsible for the display of these remnants, now re-encoded as 'art'. Yet religious images in collections are not empty signs, even removed from their liturgical setting. Their unique and original qualities, given as reasons for museumization, lead to such enhanced monetary value that they can become commodity fetishes.



18. 'Rage over Christian persecution', photo manipulation of a stained glass window (Photo: Dalton Portella, after *New York Times Magazine*, December 21, 1997)

In other ways too, acts of iconoclasm may have their own power beyond that of the original image, and this becomes part of their reception history. The damaged remains may be encoded as ruins that preserve the cultural memory of groups such as the Buddhist monks who once inhabited Bamiyan in Afghanistan, or the Roman Catholic monks in Canterbury before Henry VIII (figs 14 and 15). Divested of their original iconic and political power, such ruins may be valued as historical monuments by other peoples. Or, ruins can be trans-valued as relics, and thus inspire hatred of the perpetrator and sympathy for the group whose sacred precincts have been violated. The destroyed churches of Armenia, for instance, keep alive the memory of the persecution of Christians under Turkish rule. The photographs here document the disappearance of all but one of the 11th-century monastic churches and other buildings at Khtskonk (Bes Kalise) since 1915 (figs 16 and 17).²⁷ It is now reported that the dome of this church has collapsed.

The process that I call 'relicization' seems to be well understood by the authors of our mass media, who have used digital manipulation of a photograph to great effect (fig. 18): in 1991 a *New York Times Magazine* cover illustrated the dramatic title 'The

Rage over Christian Persecution' with a gaping hole in a 16th-century stained glass window – a sheer fiction that is attributed on a later page to Dalton Portella/Magic Graphics, where it is explained that 'Christian persecution has caused a crack in the Republican Party'. In the article, Jeffrey Goldberg explored how 'A conservative-led Washington coalition tries to remoralize American foreign policy', citing activists who claim unprecedented persecution of Christians in the 20th century. So the broken window on the cover is a metonymy for attacks on real people, charging physical rather than moral abuse.

In conclusion

Not only do historical models warn of recurring conditions in which violence may be perpetrated against people and objects, but the more recent examples indicate that even great works of art that capitalist society deems to be world treasures cannot be taken out of the currency of iconoclastic exchange. In the modern period, museums and organizations like UNESCO have striven to protect a vast human heritage that is valued beyond the confines of religious use or national patrimony. Yet in our post-modern, postcolonial era I believe there is a tendency to return these works to cycles of violence that pertained before the creation of museums. In that system of exchange there are no guarantees of survival.

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Notes

1. David Freedberg (1989).
2. Dario Gamboni (1997: 51–90).
3. Ann Kibbey (1986: 43).
4. Gary Vikan (1988) and Robert S. Nelson (1989).
5. A useful overview, with selected excerpts of texts, is that of Cyril Mango (1986: 147–77), See also Alice Mary Talbot (1998: vii–xxiv, with bibliography).
6. Among the canonized defenders of icons was St Theodosia who was savagely killed for attacking iconoclasts and having one put to death: See Nicolas Constatas's 'Life of Saint Theodosia of Constantinople', in Talbot (1998: 1–7). I owe this reference to Elizabeth Gittings.
7. Edward J. Martin (1928: 65–77); Malcolm Barber (1978: 165, 178–92).
8. 'They have bartered away the true God for a false one, and have offered reverence and worship to created things.' The second passage declares that no idolaters or homosexuals will possess the kingdom of God.
9. Eamon Duffy (1990: 21–35); and Margaret Aston (1990).

10. Ann Kibbey (1986).
11. The references and analyses of Calvinist belief concerning the nature of images and signs in Kibbey (1986: 46–7 and 176–8) are especially helpful.
12. As argued at the University of Cambridge by William Perkins in the late 16th century (Kibbey, 1986: 59–63).
13. Kibbey (1986: 102–3); the quotations are from Captain John Mason’s published justification: (Mason, 1736).
14. Jesper Rosenmeier (1970).
15. Kibbey (1986: 106–20).
16. Reproduced in John Romer (1988: 325). For standard ‘icons’ of Charles I, see Richard Ollard (1979).
17. Derek Ingram Hill (1974: 20–2); Margaret Sparks (2001: 171, 175, fig. 1).
18. Richard Culmer (1644: 22).
19. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
20. For an overview of iconoclasm in the Revolution, see Stanley J. Idzerda (1954). A detailed recent study is that of Andrews McClellan (2000).
21. Such as the portraits by Elisabeth Vigee LeBrun, painted in 1778, 1783 and 1785; see Joseph Baillio (1982: 61–4, figs 14–16). For pornographic treatments see Lynn Hunt (1999: 108–30).
22. A useful time-line for these events can be found in Lynn Hunt (1984: xiv).
23. François Giscard d’Estaing, Michel Fleury, and Alain Erlande-Brandenburg (1977b: 8, 14–17).
24. Both examples are cited in Giscard d’Estaing et al. (1977b: 8; see also p.19).
25. It is notable that a huge statue of Stalin that was tumbled in Budapest in October 1956 had the graffiti ‘W.C.’ on its cheek (Gamboni, 1997: fig. 25).
26. Information first published by François Giscard d’Estaing et al. in *Archéologia* (July 1977a).
27. Jean-Michel Thierry visited the site in 1959 and noted the disappearance, and that the remaining church was extremely dilapidated. See Thierry and Thierry (1965: 170ff.); and see also Varzad Harouthiounian (1975: 132–3). I owe these references and slides to my colleague Lucy Der Manuelian who has also documented the losses. Local peasants recalled that buildings were dynamited in 1962.

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