

Iconoclasm – A Road to Modernization?

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My point of departure is a conflict over images in the churches in Bergen, Norway in the 1560s, around 30 years after the Reformation. This introduced a brief period of iconoclasm in Denmark–Norway, inspired by Reformed theology. Soon, however, mainstream Lutheranism took over and statues and pictures were reintroduced. The different views on images in the two Protestant confessions – Lutheranism and Calvinism – are, of course, well known, as are also the various theological arguments in the debate between them. More interesting is the practical question of how it was possible to manage without images when addressing a largely illiterate audience. Here, Lutherans seemed to have basically the same attitude as Catholics, although they differed in the exact way the images were used. Both were ‘mass religions’, aiming at including the whole population and using whatever means necessary for this purpose. By contrast, Calvinism was an intellectual and elite religion, creating tight communities of true believers in accordance with the belief in Predestination. It has therefore been regarded as an important factor in modernization theories, from Weber’s explanation of capitalism to later theories of the link between Reformed Protestantism and modern science. Although there is little to indicate that pictures are an obstacle to science, the intellectual and elitist character of Reformed Protestantism may have contributed to the scientific revolution in the early modern period. Generally, the history of iconoclasm illustrates the fact that images are a powerful medium, particularly when most people are illiterate, and that a religion that abstains from this medium is faced with the challenge of finding a replacement for it.

My main example of iconoclasm in the following pages is the removal of images from the churches of Bergen in Norway in 1568–1569. By that time, Norway had been a Lutheran country for around 30 years, since 1537. The introduction of the

Reformation was the result of the union with Denmark, which had now changed from a personal union to Danish dominance; Norway was ruled from Copenhagen with Danish noblemen as the king's local representatives. In contrast to Denmark, however, there is little or no evidence of any Lutheran movement in Norway before 1537. In the beginning, the Danish authorities also introduced few changes in religious practice, fearing popular resistance. In the 1560s, however, the time would seem to have come to make some more drastic change.

In 1568, a Danish envoy criticized Jens Schjelderup (c. 1510–1582), Bishop of Bergen, for tolerating statues in the churches and, in the following year, the bishop ordered them to be removed. This was against normal Lutheran practice, which tolerated images. The removal of images was therefore the result of Calvinist influence, as is further confirmed by the treatise on images the bishop wrote later, in which he was influenced by Calvin's thought. Two books by Calvin, comments to the Letters of St Paul and his main work, the *Institutio*, have been preserved in Bergen in the library of the Cathedral School, both with extensive annotations in the same hand, probably that of the bishop. Jens Schjelderup had been a student of Niels Hemmingsen (1513–1600), the leading Danish theologian at the time, who was influenced by Reformed theology (Hagesæther 1970: 219–227).

There is sporadic evidence of iconoclasm in other places in Denmark–Norway. Pictures on the altars of the churches were replaced by writing, the so-called 'Catechism tables', expressing important parts of Christian doctrine. In Norway, iconoclasm was apparently confined to Bergen and some other towns and for a short period. Two of the three medieval churches that have been preserved in Bergen have no medieval decorations, whereas the third, St Mary's, has preserved a beautiful altarpiece from the fifteenth century. This was the church of the German merchants, over whom the bishop and the Danish authorities had limited control. Although they were also Protestants, they did not want to destroy the beautiful and costly altarpiece.

Soon, however, there were reactions against Niels Hemmingsen's theology in Denmark, and he was deposed from his chair at the University of Copenhagen. From the first half of the seventeenth century, a new iconography developed, with elaborate and beautiful altarpieces and paintings expressing Lutheran theology (Christie 1982: 121–160; Heal 2017).

The drama that played out in a distant corner of Christendom in the mid-sixteenth century forms part of a greater drama spanning from the Old Testament to the present. The ban against images has its origin in the Old Testament, as expressed in the First Commandment (Exodus 20.4): 'You shall have no other god to set against me. You shall not make a carved image for yourself nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above, or in the earth below, or in the waters under the earth'.

Why did the Jews ban images? The central theme in the Old Testament is the Jews as the elect people, clearly distinct from pagans, who, of course, worshipped many gods and their images. The Jews replaced these with the *One* transcendental God, eternal and invisible, elevated over all humans. They regarded it as blasphemy to

make pictures of him and by extension also of all creatures, which potentially might be objects of worship. Whereas Judaism was thus strictly against images, its descendant, Christianity, was largely positive, although with some exceptions. There is little evidence of Christian images during the first centuries AD, maybe partly because of Jewish tradition and partly because of lack of resources. However, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the early Christians were not consistent adherents of the Jewish ban against images.

A central piece of Christian theology may serve to explain this difference. While the Jewish God was immaterial and invisible, the Christian God had taken human shape and made himself visible. Thus, from the time of Constantine, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and Christ's divinity and the doctrine of the Trinity had become dogma, there was an extensive use of pictures, in the west as well as the east, although the east had a period of iconoclasm (early eighth century until 843) and only accepted pictures without shadows, i.e. no statues. By contrast, statues were very prominent in the west, e.g. on the west front of the great cathedrals.

Luther's and Calvin's reformation meant a reaction against Catholicism, largely based on the Bible or interpretations of the Bible. However, they had different views on images; Calvin was against, Luther for. Theologically, this largely seems to have been the result of their different attitudes to the Old Testament. For Calvin, the Bible was God's law, both in the Old and the New Testaments. The ban in the Old Testament was therefore still valid. Luther had a more flexible view, according to his principle of '*was Christum treibt*' ('what promotes Christ'). The Bible is essentially a message about God's salvation, and its various parts have authority to the extent that they proclaim this message. Therefore, the New Testament forms its centre, whereas the Old Testament serves as preparation for the New. Although the Old Testament is also God's word, not everything there is relevant to contemporary Christians. Moreover, despite his criticism of what he regarded as Catholic superstition and false worship, Luther was aware of pedagogical importance of images:

I am not of the opinion that through the Gospel all the arts should be banished and driven away, as some zealots want to make us believe; but I wish to see them all, especially music, in the service of Him Who gave and created them. . . . I have myself heard those who oppose pictures, read from my German Bible . . . But this contains many pictures of God, of the angels, of men, and of animals, especially in the Revelation of St. John, in the books of Moses, and in the book of Joshua. We therefore kindly beg these fanatics to permit us also to paint these pictures on the wall that they may be remembered and better understood, in as much as they can harm as little on the walls as in books. Would to God that I could persuade those who can afford it to paint the whole Bible on their houses, inside and outside, so that all might see; this would indeed be a Christian work. For I am convinced that it is God's will that we should hear and learn what He has done, especially what Christ suffered. But when I hear these things and meditate upon them,

I find it impossible not to picture them in my heart. Whether I want to or not, when I hear, of Christ, a human form hanging upon a cross rises up in my heart: just as I see my natural face reflected when I look into water. Now if it is not sinful for me to have Christ's picture in my heart, why should it be sinful to have it before my eyes? (Ohl 1906: 83)

Both Luther and Calvin took steps in the direction of an intellectual religion, not only for the learned but also for the common people. Of course, Catholic doctrine was equally intellectual but, in addressing the people, the Church focused on cult rather than doctrine. The mass was in Latin, incomprehensible to most people; the sermon was usually relatively short, and there was a strong appeal to emotions by music, architecture and art. There was probably a considerable difference between clergy and laity regarding doctrine. The laity had little knowledge of the Bible and only limited knowledge of Catholic doctrine, although the combination of sermons, confessions and decoration of churches may have made Catholic doctrine known to the laity.

The Lutheran service was more intellectual than the Catholic one. The sermon was its most important element and might in the seventeenth century last for several hours – there were men with sticks to wake those who fell asleep. Still, there was also a liturgy, and the service took place in a church, similar to the Catholic one, although it was less decorated. By contrast, the Calvinist service was a meeting that might equally well take place in an ordinary building. Calvinism was also less widespread and more of an elite religion. Its adherents were mostly to be found in towns and were often wealthy burghers, intellectuals and literates; it was therefore less in need of appealing to illiterates. Membership was also mostly the result of personal conviction.

There were some exceptions to this (e.g. Hungary where many nobles were Calvinists), but, in general, it was the main pattern. Therefore, Calvinism has been regarded as an important factor in explaining modernization. Weber's thesis, often referred to as 'Protestantism and capitalism', is actually about Calvinism; Max Weber (1864–1920) explicitly excludes Lutheranism. More recently, similar importance has been attributed to Calvinism in explaining the development of science (Mokyr 2016: 247–283). According to Calvinist doctrine, God wants humans to be active and successful in this world, as capitalists as well as scientists, and it was a duty for the faithful to understand God's work in nature. Calvinists also maintained that success in the world was evidence of God's protection, of belonging to the elect.

Socially and politically, Luther was closer to Catholicism; he was more concerned with appealing to the common people. Luther criticized what he regarded as Catholic superstition and false worship but was aware of the pedagogical importance of pictures. As the quotation above demonstrates, he was deeply impressed by pictorial representations himself and clearly aware of their importance in the teaching of Christian doctrine.

The ban against pictures formed a step in the direction of intellectualizing religion. When pictures are abolished, only the spoken or written word remains. This was likely to create difficulties in appealing to the common people, mostly consisting of illiterates. Eloquence and storytelling might form some compensation but would hardly be sufficient. In the long run, the solution would be to make the people literate. The spread of literacy and education was therefore at least partly a result of the Reformation, although there was a similar trend in Catholic kingdoms and principalities north of the Alps in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Bagge 2019: 242–243). However, as we know from our own, literate society, which is probably more filled with pictures than any previous society, the end result of this process was not the abolition of pictures but rather the opposite. Living in this kind of society, we can therefore conclude that iconoclasm was ultimately a failure. Nevertheless, it probably contributed to increased literacy in the early modern period, and possibly also to other aspects of modernization.

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