Anna Mambelli / Valentina Marchetto (eds.)
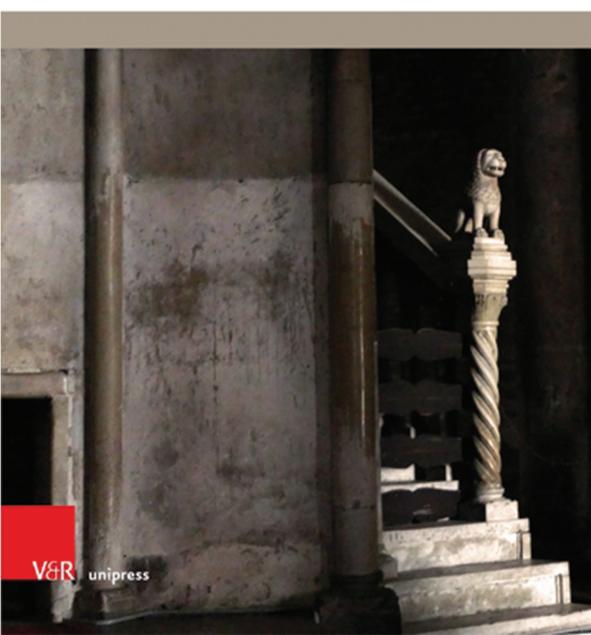
Naming the Sacred

Religious Toponymy in History, Theology and Politics

Silvia Ronchey

Destroying the Past. Monotheism, Iconoclasm and the Sacred

They run to the temples, bringing with them wood, and stones, and iron, and when they have not these, they use hands and feet. … The roofs are uncovered, walls are pulled down, statues are carried off, and altars are overturned. The priests must be silent upon pain of death. When they have destroyed one temple they run to another, and a third … . Those black-garbed people, who eat more than elephants … and hide their luxury by their pale artificial countenances … , they waste the countries together with the temples: for wherever they demolish the temple of a country, at the same time the country itself is blinded, declines, and dies. For the temples were the soul of the country, they have been the first original of the buildings in the country, and they have subsisted for many ages to this time. Wherever any country has lost its temples, that country is lost.

Words of Libanius, *Oration 30 for the Temples* (*Pro templis*), addressed to Emperor Theodosius in the fourth century.[1]

It all occurred as in the myths of the poets, when the Giants dominated the Earth: the religion of the temples of Alexandria and the sanctuary of Serapis itself were both dispersed on the winds, and not only the ceremonies, but the buildings themselves, under the reign of Theodosius", when Theophilus, the bishop of the Christians, "reigned over these abominable beings like a sort of Eurymedon over the proud Giants. And those beings, raging against our sacred places like masons on rugged stone …, demolished the temple of Serapis … and made war on its treasures and its statues, shattering them like adversaries unable to defend themselves.

Words of Eunapius, *Lives of the Sophists* (*Vitae sophistarum*), on the destruction of the Serapeum of Alessandria in 392.[2]

In view of the *fatwa* of prominent Afghan scholars and the verdict of the Afghan Supreme Court, it has been decided to break down all statues and idols present in different parts of the country. This is because these statues have remained as a shrine of infidels and they are worshipping these statues still and perhaps they may be turned into

---

1 Libanius, *Selected Orations*, ed. A.F. Norman (Loeb Classical Library 451–2; 2 vol.; Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press/W. Heinemann, 1977), 2.91–152.

2 *Life of Eustathius* VI 11.3–5: Eunapius, *Eunapii vitae sophistarum*, ed. I. Giangrande (Scriptores Graeci et Latini 4; Roma: Typis Publicae Officinae Polygraphicae, 1956), 38–9.

gods again. God Almighty is the real shrine, and all other false shrines should be smashed.

Words of the edict issued by Mullah Muhammad Omar on February 26, 2001,[3] a few days before the beginning of the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, on March 1, 2001.[4]

The *archicidium*, the destruction of statues and temples that we are witnessing, is not new to history. It was already seen seventeen centuries ago when Christianity began to establish itself as a state religion. In some areas of the globe, curiously close to those in which the so-called Islamic State is rampaging at present, the young Christian Church attacked the symbols of the widespread Hellenic cult that had preceded it. You have heard the voices of the ancient witnesses.

The voice of Libanius, a great Syrian intellectual from the fourth century, raised at the time when, in the reign of Theodosius, several pagan temples, some of them truly magnificent, were pulled down and destroyed by Christian monks both in the cities and in country places, with the consent and connivance, as Libanius stresses, of the local bishops.[5]

The voice of Eunapius, the biographer of the last pagans, described the destruction of the Serapeum of Alexandria in Egypt,[6] the symbol of the pagan religious tradition, carried out – at the same time as the Theodosian decrees that

---

3 The text is published in F. Francioni/F. Lenzerini, "The Destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan and International Law", *EJIL* 14/4 (2003) 619–51; see also P. Centlivres, *Les Bouddhas d'Afghanistan* (Lausanne: Favre, 2001), 14.

4 According to the press agencies, on Thursday, March 1, 2001, the demolition of the two ancient Buddha's statues of Bamiyan began. The two statues – 53 and 36 meters high – had been standing in Bamiyan (about 90 miles west of Kabul) since they were carved in sandstone cliffs in the third and fifth century CE. As announced by Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan Abdul Salam Zaeef, the demolition of the statues was completed on March 6, 2001, despite the difficulties in demolishing the rock-hard statues faced by the Afghan troops. The minister announced that the destruction of the statues had been ordered after consultation with religious leaders such as the Taliban Islamic Supreme Court: Francioni/Lenzerini, "The Destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan", 627; see D.C. Ahir, *Bamiyan Buddhas. Senseless Destruction by Taliban* (New Delhi: Blumoon Books, 2001), 38.

5 R. Van Loy, "Le 'Pro Templis' de Libanius", *Byzantion* 8/1 (1933) 7–39; H.G. Nesselrath (ed.), *Für Religionsfreiheit, Recht und Toleranz: Libanios' Rede für den Erhalt der heidnischen Tempel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

6 On the destruction of the Serapeum see also the version of Sozomenus, *Historia ecclesiastica* VII 15: Sozomenus, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. G.C. Hansen/J. Bidez (GCS NF 4; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960), 320–1; Rufinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* XI 23–9: E. Schwartz/T. Mommsen/F. Winkelmann (ed.), *Eusebius Werke* (9 vol.; Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, ²2011–15), II.2.1028–9 (see also on pp. II.2.1034–5); Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica* V 16–17: Socrates Scholasticus, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. G.C. Hansen (GCS NF 1; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), 289–91.

proclaimed Christianity the state religion[7] – by the monks led by the patriarch Theophilus.[8] These fundamentalist militants were called *parabalans* – a kind of Taliban, in a way.[9]

The Christian patriarch had ordered that the monumental statue of Serapis, the work of the ancient sculptor Bryaxis, should be decapitated with an axe.[10] The escalation of violence would lead shortly afterwards, once more in the city of Alexandria, to the "terroristic" assassination of the famous philosopher Hypatia.[11]

The third text dates from fifteen centuries later, and I imagine that today's readers know it well. The widespread opinion on the "iconoclastic" matrix of the destructions being carried out by ISIL today derives from the edict of Mullah Omar and from the subsequent proclamations issued to the media by the Afghan Taliban, suggesting that those destructions originate from the theological hostility of Islam towards images. Moreover, the mention of "false shrines" extends the iconoclastic matrix from what can be specifically described as "idols", that is figurative expressions of the divinity, to entire sacred architectures, such as

---

7   The constitutions of Theodosius against the pagan cults of February and June 391 and November 392, that is the so-called Theodosian decrees, can be read in the *Codex Theodosianus* XVI 10.10 and XVI 10.11: *Theodosiani libri XVI cum Constitutionibus Sirmondianis*, ed. T. Mommsen/P.M. Meyer (2 vol.; Berlin: Weidmann, 1905), 1.899–900. That it was Theophilus who personally ordered the Theodosian decrees is reported by Socrates's *Historia ecclesiastica* (ed. Hansen, 289–91) in his account of the destruction of the Serapeum.

8   The portrait of Theophilus is drawn by Edward Gibbon in *Decline and Fall* and occurs in the third volume (1781), Ch. XXVIII (see E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. D. Womersley [3 vol.; London: Penguin Classics, 1995], 3.82). It is anticipated by a Christian source, and from the monastic environment, like Palladius, who speaks reprovingly and disdainfully of him in *The Dialogue on the Life of St John Chrysostom*: Palladius, *Dialogus de vita beati Ioannis Chrysostomi*, ed. A.M. Malingrey/P. Leclerq (SC 341; Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1988).

9   The origin of the term *parabalaneus* (παραβαλανεύς) is linked to the Greek βαλανεῖον, equivalent to the Latin *balneum*, "bath". In the classical era, the *balaneus* (βαλανεύς) was the attendant who worked in the public baths, and was therefore already a kind of nurse. That in the fifth century the Alexandrian *parabalani* (παραβαλανεῖς) had the status of clergy is witnessed by the law that concerned them in *Codex Theodosianus* XVI 2.42 (September 416), *De clericis*, I (ed. Mommsen/Meyer, 850); see J. Rougé, "Les débuts de l'épiscopat de Cyrille d'Alexandrie et le code Théodosien", in C. Mondésert (ed.), *Alexandrina: héllénisme, judaïsme et christianisme à Alexandrie. Mélanges offerts au P. Claude Mondésert* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1987) 341–9.

10 On the destruction of the statue, see Theodoret of Cyrus, *Historia ecclesiastica* V 22: Theodoret, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. L. Parmentier/F. Scheidweiler (GCS NF 5; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1954), 321.

11 On Hypatia and her assassination, see S. Ronchey, *Ipazia. La vera storia* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2010); M. Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1995); E.J. Watts, *Hypatia. The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Christian churches and monasteries or archaeological sites like Palmyra, whose tragic destruction began in the summer of 2015.

To speak, on the other hand, of statues, an almost didactic illustration of the Taliban *fatwa* is the equally well-known destruction of more or less ancient statues that took place in February 2015 at the museum of Mosul, the ancient Nineveh.

Are we really sure that the attack on the global cultural heritage that ISIL is carrying out today can be attributed to an iconoclastic matrix, that is, a fundamental hostility to the image intrinsic to the Islamic religion and theology? It might seem obvious. I shall briefly try to argue why it is not.

What does the so-called religious iconoclasm really mean on historical, philosophical and theological grounds?[12]

Iconoclasm. Eἰκόνες, "images"; κλάω, "I break": "breaking the image", or "*with* the image". Since the time of Greek thought, since Plato, the function of the image, of the εἰκών, was, in the sensible world that supported it, to give an approximate projection of the purely intelligible, of the world of ideas.

In the myth of the cavern, at the end of the seventh book of the *Republic*, Plato explains that the sensible world is an ephemeral and imperfect image of the world of ideas, which is instead the true world. The only relationship between the two levels is that of the μίμησις, imitation.[13] Plato therefore condemns figurative or "imitative" art because it detracts from ideas: it produces copies of copies, images of images, and for this reason possesses the lowest cognitive value.

In the Christianisation of Platonic and Neoplatonic thinking[14] there is an immediate awareness that the overworld – Plato's hyperuranion, the heavenly

---

12 On religious iconoclasm, see H. Belting, *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (München: Beck, 1990); A. Besançon, *L'image interdite: une histoire intellectuelle de l'iconoclasme*, (Paris: Fayard, 1994); M. Bettetini, *Contro le immagini. Le radici dell'iconoclastia* (Roma/Bari: Laterza, 2006), especially pp. 92–128; G. Lingua, *L'icona, l'idolo e la guerra delle immagini. Questioni di teoria ed etica dell'immagine nel cristianesimo* (Milano: Medusa, 2006); D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 378–428.

13 Plato, *Res Publica* VII 514b–520a: Plato, *Œuvres complètes* VI–VII/2. *La République*, ed. E. Chambry (3 vol.; Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1966), VII.1.145–53.

14 According to Plotinus, artists, while creating the art image, the "icon", shall not "gaze upon any sensible model, but they should picture in their mind the divinity as it would appear if it were to show in front of our eyes [namely the artist should work according to the inner truth, which is a reflection of the intelligible reality]": see Plotinus, *Enneades* V 8.1, cited in G. Dagron, *Décrire et peindre. Essai sur le portrait iconique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 25; see also 244, n. 23. "Still the arts are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects; for, to begin with, these natural objects are themselves imitations; then, we must recognise that they give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Ideas from which Nature itself derives, and, furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking. Thus Pheidias wrought the Zeus upon no model among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus must take if he

kingdom of Christ – cannot appear to the psyche nor, therefore, represent itself except as an approximation. There emerges a problem of irrepresentability: of the divine as of the idea.

Apart from the Greek philosophical summits, aniconism was, needless to say, already part of Judaism. (It is not necessary to insist on this point here and now, since I expect that we are all sufficiently informed on the Bible and its polemic regarding idolatry.) From Judaism it passed to the "Judaic heresy" that grew during its first two centuries in the shadow of the synagogues: Christianity.[15]

The primitive Christian symbols are typically aniconic: the geometric figure of the fish, the even more abstract form of the cross.[16] The primitive Christian literature and the action of the nascent church were dominated by the battle against idols. The apologists and later, from the second half of the third century, some of the best-known and most authoritative Fathers of the Church – such as Origen, but also Eusebius of Caesarea[17] or Clement of Alexandria[18] – deplored the cult of the εἰκόνες, generally standing to indicate statues.

In Islam, the "question of the image" has never been as central as in Christianity.[19] It has rather been Islamic tolerance towards images that has preserved masterpieces of Christian figurative art, for example the pre-icono-

---

chose to become manifest to sight": trans. S. MacKenna/B.S. Page, available at http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plotenn/enn478.htm (accessed January 18, 2019).

15 For an overview of the studies on the worship of images in early Christianity see L. Brubaker, "Icons before Iconoclasm?", in Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo (ed.), *Morfologie sociali e culturali in Europa fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo* (Settimane di Studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo 45; Spoleto: CISAM, 1998) 1215–54.

16 For an outline of the primitive Christian symbols see among others J. Danielou, *Les symboles chrétiens primitifs* (Paris: Seuil, 1961).

17 See L. Canetti, "Costantino e l'immagine del Salvatore. Una prospettiva mnemostorica sull'aniconismo cristiano antico", *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 13 (2009) 233–62, on p. 244.

18 See A. Grabar, *L'iconoclasme byzantin* (Paris: Flammarion, ²1998), 21.

19 As the complex problem of Islamic aniconism has already been treated extensively by scholars in the fields of Islamic thought, culture, religion and art, it will not be necessary here to discuss the scientific literature on the topic. A recent, synthetic, well-documented and balanced overview with updated bibliographical references can be found in S. Naef, *Y a-t-il une "question de l'image" en Islam?* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015). On the relationship between primitive Jewish and Islamic aniconism and the distinction, in the two religions, between actual aniconism – namely the absence of representations of the divinity spread among western Semitic populations, like pre-Islamic Arabs – and programmatic Iconoclasm – namely the ideological superfetation of that cultural substratum that developed independently within the two religious traditions – see T. Mettingen, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1995). Mettingen's work substantiates the thesis of von Grunebaum, an orientalist who rightly postulated the independence of Byzantine iconoclasm from any Islamic influence: G.E. von Grunebaum, *Modern Islam. The Search for Cultural Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1962), 9–10.

clastic icons in St Catherine's Monastery of Mount Sinai. If it had not been for the Arab occupation, they would have been destroyed long ago.[20]

Moreover, it is well known that sacred images, according to certain rules, have been present throughout Islamic history, as witnessed for example by the rutilant portrayals of Muhammad's nocturnal journey towards Jerusalem, of his ascension to heaven and his visit to paradise and to hell.[21]

The iconographic tradition of the Prophet has existed for eight centuries, as Oleg Grabar has shown,[22] and in the literature of the *hadith* there is no prohibition to portraying either Muhammad or the other prophets,[23] despite what was said at the start of 2006, during the so-called crisis of the caricatures.[24]

The experts had already at that time emphasised the prevalently social and political, not theological, nature of the problem: the caricatures of Muhammad affected less the sphere of representability and more that of blasphemy; and they came from countries, such as Denmark and France, with problematic Muslim immigration situations.[25] The results were, unfortunately, evident at the start of 2015, with the martyrdom of Charlie Hebdo.

However, let us return to the Byzantine world. The two traditions that we have mentioned – the Greek philosophical condemnation of the image and the Judeo-Christian religious condemnation of the idol – converge when, from the fourth century, Christian theology is constructed within a substantially Platonic structure. From the primitive iconoclasm inherited from Judaism and motivated by

---

20 On the relationship, however controversial, between Islam and Christian doctrine see G.R.D. King, "Islam, Iconoclasm and the Declaration of Doctrine", *BSOAS* 48/2 (1985) 267–77.

21 Naef, *Y a-t-il une "question de l'image"*, 52, 74.

22 See O. Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 1973), 84; an extraordinary exemplar of Muhammad's nocturnal journey's iconography is found in the Timurid manuscript (BNF Sup. Turc. 190: Anonymus, *Miʻrajnama*) studied by C.J. Gruber, *The Timurid Book of Ascension (Miʻrajnama). A Study of Text and Image in a Pan-Asiatic Context* (Valencia: Patrimonio Ediciones, 2008); see also C.J. Gruber/F. Colby (ed.), *The Prophet's Ascension. Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Miʻrāj Tales* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009); C.J. Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension. A Persian-Sunni Devotional Tale* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2010).

23 For the position of the two theologians al-Farisi and al-Qurtubi on this matter see B. Farès, "Philosophie et jurisprudence illustrées par les Arabes. Appendice: La querelle des images en Islam", in *Mélanges Louis Massignon* (2 vol.; Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1957), 2.77–109, especially on p. 100.

24 See Naef, *Y a-t-il une "question de l'image"*, 98–9.

25 Ibid., 99. On this see also F. Boespflug, *Caricaturer Dieu? Pouvoirs et dangers de l'image* (Paris: Bayard, 2006). Boespflug has shown how among the three monotheistic religions only Christianity, and only recently (since the nineteenth century), contemplates an ironic representation of God and the saints. Even more recent is the aetiology that claims that the crisis of caricatures goes back to Wahhabite righteousness, as this schismatic, peripheral and circumscribed religious tradition rejects every kind of image (including pictures).

the battle against pagan cults – which was also common to Islam – we move on to a philosophical iconoclasm that derives from Plato.

Christianity's philosophy of reference was, and remained, Platonic until the so-called iconoclasm, the lengthy, complex and refined theological duel that would give rise in Byzantium, in the ninth century, to a new status of the image.[26] The icon would no longer be comparable to the idol only if it was not intended to "describe" naturalistically the sacred figure but rather to represent it theologically[27] and to create a system of spiritual correspondences with its super-substantial essence.[28]

Byzantine iconoclasm marked a turning point. Images were neither forbidden nor permitted. They changed. The icon became something else, which brings us straight into the twentieth century. The debate in the Byzantine eighth and ninth centuries opened the way for twentieth-century abstract art.[29]

---

26 For a historical approach to Byzantine iconoclasm see above all: Grabar, *L'iconoclasme byzantin*; P. Schreiner, "Der byzantinische Bilderstreit: kritische Analyse der zeitgenössischen Meinungen und das Urteil der Nachwelt bis heute", in A. Guillou (ed.), *Bisanzio, Roma e l'Italia nell'Alto Medioevo* (Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 34; Spoleto: CISAM, 1988) 319–407, repr. in P. Schreiner, *Byzantinische Kultur: eine Aufsatzsammlung* (4 vol.; Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2006–13), I. *Die Macht*, ed. S. Ronchey/E. Velkovska, 319–407; M.F. Auzépy, *L'iconoclasme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2006); L. Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012); L. Brubaker/J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850. A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); C. Dupeux/P. Jezler/J. Wirth (ed.), *Iconoclasme. Vie et mort de l'image médiévale. Catalogue de l'exposition (Musée d'Histoire de Berne; Musée de l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame, Musées de Strasbourg)* (Paris: Somogy, 2001).

27 In the "hypostasis in which it is inscribed", ἐγγραφομένου: Council of Nicaea II, *Definitio de sacris imaginibus*, DS 601; Greek text, with Italian translation, in E. Fogliadini, *L'invenzione dell'immagine sacra. La legittimazione ecclesiale dell'icona al secondo concilio di Nicea* (Milano: Jaca Book, 2015), 26.

28 According to John of Damascus, nor men, nor Celestial Virtues, nor the Cherubim, nor the Seraphim, can know God, for He is by nature beyond being and consequently beyond knowledge. His essence can be described only apophatically, by negations (ἀποφατικῶς), and what we say positively about God (καταφατικῶς) does not indicate his nature but "his attributes, what is around his nature" (τὰ περὶ τὴν φύσιν); see John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei* I 4, especially 32–5; *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, ed. B. Kotter, (Patristische Texte und Studien 12; 2 vol.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), 2.13: "Εἰ γὰρ τῶν ὄντων αἱ γνώσεις, τὸ ὑπὲρ γνῶσιν πάντως καὶ ὑπὲρ οὐσίαν ἔσται, καὶ τὸ ἀνάπαλιν τὸ ὑπὲρ οὐσίαν καὶ ὑπὲρ γνῶσιν ἔσται. Ἄπειρον οὖν τὸ θεῖον καὶ ἀκατάληπτον, καὶ τοῦτο μόνον αὐτοῦ καταληπτόν, ἡ ἀπειρία καὶ ἡ ἀκαταληψία. Ὅσα δὲ λέγομεν ἐπὶ θεοῦ καταφατικῶς, οὐ τὴν φύσιν ἀλλὰ τὰ περὶ τὴν φύσιν δηλοῖ. Κἂν ἀγαθόν, κἂν δίκαιον, κἂν σοφόν, κἂν ὅ τι ἂν εἴπῃς, οὐ φύσιν λέγεις θεοῦ, ἀλλὰ τὰ περὶ τὴν φύσιν. Εἰσὶ δὲ καί τινα καταφατικῶς ἐπὶ θεοῦ λεγόμενα δύναμιν ὑπεροχικῆς ἀποφάσεως ἔχοντα, οἷον σκότος λέγοντες ἐπὶ θεοῦ οὐ σκότος νοοῦμεν, ἀλλ'ὅτι οὐκ ἔστι φῶς ἀλλ'ὑπὲρ τὸ φῶς".

29 An original and interesting approach to the history of the aesthetic debate on the prohibition of images from Plato to Malevich can be found in Besançon, *L'image interdite*; see also M.-J. Mondzain, *Image, icône, économie. Les sources byzantines de l'imaginaire contemporain* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

The Russian theoreticians (Florensky, Troubetzkoy)[30] would openly refer to the theology of the icon formulated at that time, on the basis of which abstract art, in Russia and later in France, would avowedly base itself "on the model of the icon painters" (Matisse).[31] We can see this process particularly in the works of the Russian avant-garde painters, such as Kliment Redko,[32] and, even more strikingly, in those of Kandinsky.[33]

Not only are the three monotheistic religions that have marked history and the thinking of the civilisation in which we have been immersed for more than two thousand years linked by the same aniconic imprint, but this aniconism has been the landfall of our aesthetic since the start of the Short Century: of contemporary art, of abstract art. Iconoclasm, the break *with* the image, has permeated a wide swath of our art: it has nothing to do with the war we are witnessing, which, instead, destroys art.

The belligerent actions of the radical Islamic terrorists do not derive from an immanent doctrine of the Islamic religion but from the "political iconoclasm" which is proper to revolutionary actions, directed at the destruction of the symbols of the order they oppose – either bluntly political or political-ecclesiastic, as in the case of the Protestant reformers of sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century Europe.

---

30 P. Florensky, *Ikonostas* (1922), *Bogoslovskie Trudy 1902–1909*, IX (Moskva: Izdanie Moskovskoj Patriarchii, 1972) = Id., *Le porte regali. Saggio sull'icona* (1922), ed. E. Zolla (Milano: Adelphi, 1977); E.N. Troubetzkoy, *Tri očerka o russkoj ikone* (1916) (*Umozrenie v kraskach* [1915], *Dva mira v drevnerusskoj ikonopisi* [1916] *i Rossija v eë ikone* [1917]) (Moskva: InfoArt 1991) = Id., *Contemplazione nel colore. Tre studi sull'icona russa* (1916), ed. P. Cazzola (Milano: La Casa di Matriona, 1977); see also L. Ouspensky/W. Lossky, *Der Sinn der Ikonen* (Bern: Urs Graf-Verlag, 1952).

31 As Georges Duthuit, the great connoisseur of Matisse, wrote, "On ne peut comprendre Matisse sans avoir abordé et assimilé l'art byzantin": G. Duthuit, *Le Feu des signes* (Genève: Skira, 1962). Beside the fundamental references to recent critical texts mentioned by Dagron, *Décrire et peindre*, 252, n. 49, see also A. Chastel, *L'Italie et Byzance*, ed. C. Lorgues-Lapouge (Paris: Éditions de Fallois, 1999), 10–12, 15; see also D.S. Likhachov, *Bozniknovenie russkoj literatury* (Moskva/Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk, 1952) = D.S. Likhachov, *Le radici dell'arte russa. Dal medioevo alle avanguardie*, ed. E. Kostjukovič (Milano: Bompiani, 2005).

32 Russian avant-garde focussed its research on the aesthetics and the idea of the icon. At the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, the icon became a trend in Russian intellectual circles as it was considered "an unveiled masterpiece, the expression of the greatest importance, a superior work of art, the most modern product of western art": I. Foletti, "Tra classicismi e avanguardie: la ricezione dell'estetica bizantina in Francia e in Russia tra Otto e Novecento", in V. Cantone/S. Pedone (ed.), *Phantazontes. Visioni dell'arte bizantina* (Padova: CLEUP, 2013) 175–255, especially on pp. 230–7; for the citation see 237, n. 136; see also Id., *Da Bisanzio alla Santa Russia. Nikodim Kondakov (1844–1925) e la nascita della storia dell'arte in Russia* (Roma: Viella, 2011), 121–4.

33 W. Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst, insbesondere in der Malerei* (München: Reinhard Piper, 1912); Id., *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche, Beitrag zur Analyse der malerischen Elemente* (München: Albert Langen, 1926).

Endorsing the ideological claims of ISIL, which trace to Islamic iconoclasm their vandalism in destroying the "sacred" monuments of the past, is not only bad theology, it is also bad history: it is as historically dangerous as speaking of the "Middle Ages" when referring to the fundamentalist barbarities of the extreme fringes of contemporary Islam. Indeed, our dominant clichés feed on a "medieval" definition of the Islamic world, which means, alternatively, the civil, social and economic backwardness of its postcolonial history, or the brutality of the wars that we start in it.

However, the medieval metaphor does not only come from the West. In 2001, a few days after 9/11, Osama bin Laden launched his historical appeal on Al Jazeera "against the American crusaders", calling President George W. Bush "the biggest crusader under the flag of the Cross". Since 2001, just as it has become a western stereotype to see Islam as "iconoclastic", so it has become an Islamic stereotype to see the West as "crusaders". Thus today it is the troops of ISIL who undertake in the eastern world the devastations that the Latin crusaders once carried out. I should like to add to the voices of the ancient witnesses you have heard – Libanius and Eunapius – a third voice: that of a Byzantine intellectual of the thirteenth century.

The most massive and vandalising destruction of statues in the history of religious conflicts in Mediterranean civilisation cannot be attributed to Islam or to the Arabs, the Turks, the Wahhabi purists or even to the Protestant reformers of sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century Europe. It is due to the Catholic knights of the Fourth Crusade, who conquered Constantinople in 1204.[34] A list of the statues destroyed during the crusaders' occupation is provided by Nicetas Choniates, one of the many Byzantine intellectuals who saw the events first hand before fleeing from the barbarities of the "Latins", saving their own cargo of culture. Nicetas gives a poignant description of the fall of Constantinople and in particular of the many ancient bronze statues on the Forum of Constantine and the Hippodrome, systematically destroyed, broken into pieces and melted down by the crusaders.[35]

What do the crusaders have to do with iconoclasm? Nothing at all. It was precisely the papal authority in Rome who was the first and greatest enemy of the iconoclastic doctrinal position of the Byzantines. In the same way, the *archicidium* about which we are so concerned has nothing to do with iconoclasm, but

---

34 On the Fourth Crusade see S. Runciman, *A History of the Crusades* (3 vol.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951–4), 3.107–31; T.F. Madden/E.Q. Donald, *The Fourth Crusade. The Conquest of Constantinople* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); J. Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades* (London/New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 145–62.

35 Nicetas Choniates, *Nicetae Choniatae historia*, ed. J.L. van Dieten (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), 648–55.

with the vandalising, brutal intention to eliminate not only archaeology but, quite literally, the past – for a military and political purpose, because, as George Orwell wrote in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "Who controls the past … controls the future; who controls the present controls the past".