“You shall not make for yourself an idol,” says the Lord to Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. Many in the early church respected this Old Testament injunction. Others, however, created images. This tension has continued throughout Christian history. One of the most divisive controversies took place in the Byzantine church between the iconoclasts and the iconophiles. My paper examines the theological basis for this conflict.

The earliest Christian images appeared around the year 200 C.E., nearly a century after Christianity itself made its first appearance. These images – painted on the walls of the catacombs or carved into sarcophagi – were not merely decorative. They served a particular and important purpose. Andre Grabar writes that “[t]hose first makers of Christian images, who worked at their own risk and to their peril, would never have done so without serious religious reasons.” These early Christian images showed Biblical scenes and characters as a form of instruction.

A wall in the Roman Catacomb of Domitilla, dated about 325, bears such an image. A young Christ sits among his even younger apostles. He holds a book and raises His hand, signifying that he is teaching them. This scene emphasizes Christ’s teachings as a way to attain salvation. A more elaborate example is from the catacomb of Commodilla. An image of Christ on the ceiling dominates the small room. The Greek letters Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end, frame his face, indicating that He is the Lord of all. One wall depicts the imprisoned Peter bringing forth water from a rock in order to baptize his jailors and fellow prisoners; and the other shows Jesus with two Roman martyrs, Felix and Adactus.

Images were not limited to Rome. They also appeared in Eastern Christianity, as is evident in the early third-century Dura baptistery. The baptistery was part of an early Christian house in the town of Dura-Europa, in modern Syria. The walls were once covered with images, though many no longer remain. However, those that have survived reveal the room’s purpose. Images of Adam and Eve with the Good Shepherd signify both original sin and redemption. Other images – the Samaritan woman at the well and Christ walking on water – represent baptism.

Following the sack of Rome in 410, the Empire in the West began to decline.
Theology of Icons

In the East, nevertheless, a centralized government continued to thrive; and with it, Byzantine art. Images were an important part of the Byzantine Church, closely related to the Incarnation, Jesus’ taking a human body. Bissera V. Pentcheva comments, “Once the Virginal body of Mary received and gave flesh to the divine Word, it offered relative holiness to matter.” It is traditionally believed that the first icon was a linen cloth that Christ used to wipe his face, leaving on it an imprint of his physiognomy. While this first icon has many names, the Russians call it The Image Not Made with Hands. Later icons took this name because they portrayed something that humans did not – and could not – create.

Because it was such a holy object, a representation of the first icon was made – just as the early Christians had done of Old Testament figures. This tradition continued even into the eighteenth century when the Mandylion of Edessa was created. The word “Mandylion” is derived from the Greek word for cloth or kerchief.

Creators of icons attempted to reflect accurately the subject or earlier icon that served as their inspiration. Margaret Kenna explains, “By representing that original in a particular way it maintains a connection with it, as a translation does with the original text.” Icons gave the spiritual realm physicality. They represented, not only what they portrayed, but also the relationship between the Creator and the Created.

Essential to the creation and comprehension of icons, moreover, is the knowledge that they were not to be worshiped or even appreciated as art. They served only to direct respect and reverence to the spiritual. The sixth-century icon of Christ at Sinai is an ideal example. As another version of the Image Not Made With Hands, it would have been believed to be the actual image of Christ, the man. This belief and its large size suggest that it was made for the church as a tool to understanding Christ.

During the Early Byzantine Period, however, the creation and reverence of icons sparked a heated and destructive controversy. For more than a century, beginning in the year 726, Byzantium experienced a period of opposition to the use of images as a form of veneration. Those who opposed icons were called iconoclasts while those who supported them were called iconophiles. Iconoclasts believed that the use of images violated the Old Testament prohibition against idols. They further claimed that by portraying God, the Church was denying His perfection and transcendence. Part of the argument of the iconoclasts was merely practical: To portray Christ as a human being – because his divinity was, of course, impossible to express visually – was misleading. Such a portrayal implied that Christ was not divine, but only human. The iconoclasts’ disapproval led them to destroy icons and persecute
those who venerated them. This destruction was known as iconoclasm, literally “image breaking”. Most early icons were destroyed during the iconoclasm. Few images predating 843 have survived, making those that have even more precious.

The argument of the iconoclasts was countered by the iconophiles and supported by the Second Council of Nicaea held in 787. The Council declared that icons could be placed in churches because they inspired those who saw them to imitate the holy figures. The Council further stated that worship was reserved for the Divinity. However, just as the faithful would honor the cross on which Christ died, they might honor icons as well. In honoring the icons – by burning incense – Christians were actually venerating God, Mary, or the saint whom the icon depicted. For example, the sixth-century icon The Virgin and Child with Saints and Angels, from the Monastery of Saint Catherine, includes Mary and Jesus but also the warrior-saints Theodore and George and two angels looking heavenward.

The theology that supports the use of icons is based on the Incarnation of Christ. According to Kenna, “By taking on human shape and substance, Jesus Christ . . . became capable of being depicted. Through the Incarnation, matter itself was ‘deified.’” In taking human form, Christ nullified the Old Testament belief that representational images were a form of idolatry. The iconophiles further claimed that not to create physical representations of Christ would be to deny the Incarnation.

A sixth-century mosaic in the apse of the Church of Sant’Apollinare in Classe attempts to illustrate both the divinity and humanity of Christ. The central scene of The Transfiguration of Christ is a jeweled cross with Christ’s face in the center. A single hand – the hand of God – reaches down from Heaven, confirming Christ’s divinity; and images of Moses and Elijah connect the Old and New Testaments, justifying the validity of Christ and His new religion. Added later, Christ as man looks down on the scene.

The conflict was eventually resolved at the Fourth Council of Constantinople where the destruction of icons was declared a heresy. The Council stated the following:

It is only right then, in accordance with true reason and very ancient tradition, that icons should be honoured and venerated in a derivative way because of the honour which is given to their archetypes, and it should be equal to that given to the sacred book of the holy gospels and the representation of the precious cross. If anyone then does not venerate the icon of Christ . . . [l]et those . . . be anathema from the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

This event inspired a new icon, The Triumph of Orthodoxy. The figures
The Theology of Icons

at the bottom of the icon represent iconophiles who were martyred. The two in the center hold an icon of Christ. Painted in the fourteenth century, it may have been displayed every year on the anniversary of the victory of the iconophiles. Early Byzantine icons thus were the cause of a century-long conflict between Christians. The conflict was significant in the effect it had on theology and art. Graham Howes writes, “It was the Incarnation that legitimized early Christian art, making possible the visualization of God.” The theology of the iconophiles, greatly influenced art by allowing images to be made of holy figures. The icons themselves contributed to Christian spirituality by providing an image of holiness.

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