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# Byzantine and Arab Iconoclasm - a Comparative Look

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## **Abstract**

In its first part, the study presents the Byzantine iconoclasm, the causes of its appearance, the historical period in which it appeared and manifested, the main representatives of the fight against the Holy Icons. The second part refers to the iconoclastic measures taken by the Arab caliphate, measures justified from the Muslim point of view, because Islam is by definition against any iconic representation. Therefore, the measures taken against the Holy Icons were against all Christians in the East, whether they were within the borders of the Byzantine Empire or outside these borders, that is, in the Arab Caliphate.

## **Keywords**

Iconoclasm, Interreligious dialogue, Arab World, Byzantine Empire

## **I. The iconoclastic crisis. Overview**

Iconoclasm is the Christian heresy that appeared in the VIII-IX centuries and that manifests itself as a fight against the Holy Icons, with the aim of destroying them. Etymologically, iconoclasm means the destruction of icons. In the specialized literature to designate the same action of fight against the Holy Icons the term *icononomahy* is used.

The iconoclastic crisis that broke out in the Christian East was closely linked to the Christological problem, which required for centuries clarifications, following the heresies, heresies concerning the divinity of the Savior, His humanity, and the way of the hypostatic union of the two natures in the divine-human hypostasis of the Savior Jesus Christ. The 5th, 6th and 7th centuries witness these Christological divisions in the East.

The Byzantine emperors of the eighth and ninth centuries supported the iconoclastic heresy, being used in this movement both theological and non-theological arguments. Unlike the other heresies started from the ecclesiastical environment, being initiated by priests (Arius, for example) or bishops (Nestorius), iconoclasm is the heresy initiated and supported by the Byzantine emperors, using military force in this regard, which gives this heresies the violence and cruelty with which it was imposed<sup>1</sup>.

The iconoclasm lasted a century, starting with the Isaurian dynasty (717-802) and ending during the Amorium dynasty, in the year 843 and knew two stages. The first begins with Leo III Isaurus in 726 and ends with Empress Irina and her son Constantine VI, with the VII Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787, and the second stage begins in 813, with the accession to the throne of Leo V the Armenian and ends in 843, during the reign of Emperor Michael III, under the influence of his mother, Empress Theodora<sup>2</sup>. It can be seen how two empresses: Irina and Teodora contributed decisively to the defense of the cult of the Holy Icons.

## II. The causes of the iconoclastic heresy

Father John Meyendorff in his work entitled *Byzantine Theology*, states among the main causes that marked the emergence of iconoclasm:

### II.1. The problem of images – an expression of religious culture<sup>3</sup>

Greek-speaking Christians inherited, from their pagan past, a taste for religious imagery, for the anthropomorphic representation of their deities.

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<sup>1</sup> Preot Prof. Dr. Emanoil BĂBUȘ, *Bizanțul istorie și spiritualitate*, Ed. a II-a revizuită și adăugită, Editura Sofia, București, 2012, p. 279.

<sup>2</sup> See Pr. E. BĂBUȘ, *Bizanțul istorie și spiritualitate*, p. 279.

<sup>3</sup> See the arguments offered in this way by John MEYENDORFF, *Teologia bizantină. Tendințe istorice și teme doctrinare*, translated by Preot conf. dr. Alexandru Stan, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996, p. 60.

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The idol statues were beautifully represented from an artistic point of view, true works of art. Gradually, however, under the influence of Christianity, in order to detach itself from any concrete representation of divinity, idolatry, the third dimension of figurative representations was abandoned, reaching from the three-dimensional statue to the two-dimensional icon. Other Eastern Christians, such as Syrians and Armenians, were much less inclined, because of their cultural past, to worship icons. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the emperors who supported the iconoclasm came from Syria, Armenia or Isauria. Father J. Meyendorff points out that the Greek-speaking East “was almost entirely Monophysite in the early eighth century, and (...) Monophysitism tacitly or explicitly fed the iconoclasts with the substance of their theological arguments”<sup>4</sup>.

The icons were gradually honored as an expression of a Christian religious culture that had begun to form over time, becoming a presence in the place of worship. At first they were honored in private homes, appearing the so-called domestic icons, ie depicting a unique portrait on a small piece of wood. Also here began to appear the corner with icons (in Greek το εικονοστάσι = iconostasis), also called icon stand, there being no house without its small iconostasis<sup>5</sup>. Because women had less involvement in public worship, they found the religious environment conducive to their personal piety at home; therefore, they became more attached to the veneration of the Holy Icons, as can be seen from their struggle for the defense of icons during the outbreak of iconoclastic heresy<sup>6</sup>.

In the fifth century

“The cult of icons was associated with the belief that they can work miracles. The icon, integrated in the individual religious practice, already marked the reassuring presence of the Divinity. Initially having a domestic character, the use of icons has acquired a public, official character. In 560, in order to raise funds for the construction of a church in northern Syria, the priests travelled with an icon of the Savior Christ in solemn procession throughout Asia Minor. Some witnesses of the time attest to the

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<sup>4</sup> J. MEYENDORFF, *Teologia bizantină...*, p. 60

<sup>5</sup> Louis BRÉHIER, *Civilizația bizantină*, translated by Nicolae Spinescu, Editura Științifică, București, 1994, p. 212.

<sup>6</sup> Pr. E. BĂBUȘ, *Bizanțul istorie și spiritualitate*, p. 280.

fact that, during the Avar siege of 626, the patriarch asked for the face of the Savior and the Mother of God to be painted on the western gates of Constantinople. The same thing was repeated in 717, when on the walls of the capital were walked in procession an icon of the Mother of God and parts of the Holy Cross”<sup>7</sup>.

Here is how little by little the public veneration of the icons is reached, without mentioning here how the icon becomes an object of the piety of the faithful inside the churches. Therefore, in the pre-Cycloclastic period it can be stated that the Holy Icons became a living presence in the life of the righteous people, being used by the clergy, by the authorities, by the people, being honored in public, but also in private.

## II.2. The Confrontation with Islam

After the conquest of Palestine, Syria and Egypt by the Arab Caliphate, the Byzantines were in constant conflict with Islam, both militarily and ideologically. Both Christianity and Islam claimed to be universal and revealed religions, headed by the Byzantine emperor and the Arab caliph. Based on the fact that it was the last religion to appear on the stage of history, Islam claimed to be the last revelation and the purest revelation of God, the others becoming obsolete as a result. The accusations that the Islamic theology made about Christianity concerned the so-called Christian polytheism, through the worship of God, but also the so-called Christian idolatry because of the veneration of the Holy Icons. The emperors from the East of the Byzantine Empire in the 8th century responded to the latter accusation. Father J. Meyendorff argues that “they decided to purify Christianity to make it better able to withstand the onslaught of Islam. Thus, there was an Islamic influence on the iconoclastic movement, but this influence was part of the Cold War against Islam and was not a conscious imitation of it”<sup>8</sup>.

If we read in this key the interreligious christian-islamic dialogue, then we understand that the approach of Emperor Leo III Isaurus was not the expression of an influence suffered from the Islamic doctrine, which would

<sup>7</sup> Pr. E. BĂBUȘ, *Bizanțul istorie și spiritualitate*, p. 281.

<sup>8</sup> J. MEYENDORFF, *Teologia bizantină...*, p. 61.

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have led him to try to abolish the cult of the holy icons, but only an attempt to purify the Christian teaching of those elements that contradicted the Islamic creed, to try to reconcile the two monotheisms. This explains the Orthodox teaching about the veneration of icons to which the emperor gives expression in the epistolary exchange with the Arab caliph.

### **II.3. The legacy of the Greek spiritualism**

J. Meyendorff considers that at the beginning of the iconoclastic controversy, supported by the emperors Leo III Isaurus and Constantine V Copronymus (741-775), there were nontheological factors, but the iconoclasts discovered even in the Greek Christian tradition new arguments not related with the condemned Monophysitism or external cultural influences. In connection with the medieval iconoclasm was placed an iconoclastic current of thought that came from primary Christianity and was related to Origenism. The early Christian apologists resembled the Jews regarding the Old Testament prohibitions of the worship of any representations of God<sup>9</sup>. They literally interpreted the Old Testament biblical text in this regard. In anti-Christian controversy, Neoplatonic writers “mimicked the importance of idols in Greek paganism and gave birth to a relative doctrine of the image as a means of access to the divine prototype, and not as the abode of the divine itself. They used this argument to demonstrate the religious inferiority of Christianity”<sup>10</sup>. For example, the Neoplatonic philosopher Profririus wrote that:

“If some Greeks are foolish enough to believe that the gods live within idols, their thinking remains purer than that (of Christians) who believe that the God entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and became an embryo, that was born and was wrapped up, that was full of blood, skins and even lower things”<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Among the Church Fathers and the early Christian writers who proved to be refractory to the veneration of the Holy Icons are: St. Justin the Martyr and the philosopher, Athenagoras the Athenian, Tertullian, St. Epiphanius of Salamis, Eusebius of Caesarea and others, and they were justified in doing that, if we consider that they lived in the first centuries of Christianity, when there was a high risk of relapse into earlier pagan idolatry.

<sup>10</sup> J. MEYENDORFF, *Teologia bizantină...*, p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> MANSI, XIII, 252 AB, 256 AB, apud J. MEYENDORFF, *Teologia bizantină...*, p. 61.

We will find the same kind of arguments against the possibility of the incarnation of the Son of God later in the Islamic polemic against Christianity.

Porphyry was intelligent enough to understand that the belief in the historical incarnation of God was opposed to iconoclasm, because a historical Christ had to be seen and therefore iconically representative, which is why the icon began to spread as early as the third century, even if until then we have simpler iconic representations or using a specifically Christian symbolism. But in Christian circles influenced by Neoplatonic spiritualism, such as that of Origen, for example, the iconoclastic tendencies persisted. Therefore, the conclusion of the theologian J. Meyendorff is that there is sufficient evidence to prove that:

“The theological advisers of Leo III, the first iconoclastic emperor, were also followers of Origen with views very identical to those of Eusebius. Thus, a purely «Greek» iconoclasm, quite different from a philosophical point of view from the Oriental and Islamic one, led to this movement”<sup>12</sup>.

#### II.4. The presence of the heretical sects

In addition to the three causes of iconoclasm identified by Father J. Meyendorff, we have added a fourth cause, because towards the end of the seventh century and the beginning of the next century, it can be seen that in Byzantine society there was a great polarization regarding the worship of the holy icons. The society was divided in two, between those who were partisans of the veneration of the icons and their opponents, but if this division could be seen in every Christian community, one can also notice the division between the western part of the empire, which was favorable to the icons and where the reactions against their veneration had a more isolated character than in the eastern part where the iconoclasm manifested itself much more strongly due to the Jewish, Islamic influences and of the Christian sects and heresies<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> J. MEYENDORFF, *Teologia bizantină...*, p. 62.

<sup>13</sup> Jean GOUILLARD, “L’hérésie dans l’empire byzantin des origines au XIIe siècle”, in: *Travaux et Mémoires*, Tome 1 (1965), pp. 299-324.

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Towards the end of the seventh century, at the Quinisext Synod (691-692), Canon 82 established that the Savior should be represented as a man, not as a lamb, in order to show through this the mystery of His incarnation<sup>14</sup>. In this way, attention was drawn to the reality and importance of the incarnation of the Lord in the economy of salvation. Canon 82 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council had as an immediate consequence the painting of the image of the Savior, not only in the symbolic form of the lamb, but even more so, the appearance of His image on the coins struck by Emperor Justinian II. This canon “immediately provoked a series of iconoclastic reactions in Constantinople, Asia Minor and Armenia: Theodosius, the bishop of Ephesus, Thomas, the bishop of Claudiopolis and Constantine of Nicoleia were among the most important iconologists of this period”<sup>15</sup>.

The truth is that some exaggerations were made in the honor of the icons, and this excess displeased many, which led them to demand their destruction. Among those who demanded the banning on the worship of the Holy Icons were some sects and heresies, such as the Pavlicians, who did not honor the Holy Cross, did not have the worship of the Mother of God and the saints<sup>16</sup>. Also, for the Monophysites, present and active in the Eastern parts of the Byzantine Empire, iconoclasm was the natural consequence of their doctrine. They claimed that the iconic reproduction of the Savior’s image was impossible because, according to their heretical teaching, by virtue of hypostatic union, humanity was annulled in the

<sup>14</sup> Here is the full text of the 82nd canon of the Synod of Quinisex: “In some faces represented in the honoured icons, the lamb is depicted by being pointed at with the finger of the Forerunner, and was understood as the image of grace, depicting us, beforehand by law, the true lamb, Christ our God. Therefore, honoring the old faces and shadows as signs and imaginations of truth, transmitted through tradition by the Church, we honor first of all the grace and the truth, receiving it as the fulfillment of the Law. Wherefore, that which is perfect may be made manifest to the eyes of all, by the craft of colors, too, we order that henceforth Christ our God, the Lamb who took away the sin of the world, be also shown in icons in the likeness of the human face instead of the old lamb, that, by this, we may understand the greatness of God The Word, that we may be guided also in remembrance of his rejoicing in the flesh, and of His passion, and of His saving death, and of the redemption of the world, which was made through this”. Cf. Arhidiacon prof. dr. Ioan N. FLOCA, *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe. Note și comentarii*, 1993, p. 151.

<sup>15</sup> Pr. E. BĂBUȘ, *Bizanțul istorie și spiritualitate*, p. 284.

<sup>16</sup> About the pavlicians see Ioan Petru CULIANU, *Gnozele dualiste ale Occidentului*, Editura Nemira, București, 1995, pp. 236-247.

Person of Christ, human nature being absorbed by the divine, and the divine nature cannot be known and represented pictorially. In other words, since humanity is no longer present in the Person of the Savior Christ, the painter no longer had anything to represent pictorially.

Father Vasile Munteanu is also of the opinion that heretical sects in these areas of the empire favored the emergence of iconoclasm, when he states that since 723 we can see the influence of the Monophysites, who favored an iconoclastic position, rejecting the worship of the holy icons, and iconoclasm was “genetically linked to the heresies of Asia Minor. Considerable remnants of Monophysitism remained here and the sect of the Pavlicians developed, the enemies of any church cult”<sup>17</sup>. Under their influence, the Byzantine emperor Leo III Isaurus will enter into a dialogue with the Umayyad caliph.

### III. The iconoclasm of Leo III Isaurus

Iconoclasm is that heretical current related to the person and reign of Leo III Isaurus or the Syrian - according to other historians, which although begins to manifest even before his reign, will take a special dimension during this emperor, being as a true state policy in religious matters.

We have to mention also the fact that the Isaurian dynasty was influenced by Islam, the iconoclastic emperors being all of Anatolian, Syrian origin. In those places, art with “consubstantial” figurations was cultivated, an art with a magical aspiration.

“Having come to rule of the empire and considering that he had the right to control church and secular issues, Leo III Isaurus imposed iconoclasm as the official doctrine of the empire out of religious beliefs. He considered that through this attitude he purified the Christian religion from the remnants of paganism, bringing it back to its original height and purity”<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Pr. Prof. Dr. Vasile MUNTEANU, *Istoria creștină generală \* (ab initio - 1054)*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2008, p. 197.

<sup>18</sup> Pr. E. BĂBUȘ, *Bizanțul istorie și spiritualitate*, pp. 284-285.

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It is known that the iconoclastic emperors were faithful people, being good connoisseurs of theology, as was the case of Leo III Isaurus.

The emperor could be directly influenced by heresiarchs such as Theodosius of Ephesus, Constantine of Nicoleia, Thomas of Claudiopolis, but also by the visit to Constantinople of Genesisios, the ruler of the Pavlicians, in 726<sup>19</sup>. They visited Patriarch Gherman of Constantinople and they asked him to forbid the worship of the Holy Icons, but he refused their request. It also seems that the iconoclastic bishops also visited Emperor Leo III, with whom they found common ground, and who would have encouraged them in their endeavor. Of course, the role of the emperor is not of little importance, because without his contribution, the bishops could not have done anything.

There have been, we must admit, excesses manifested in honor of the Holy Icons, an honor sometimes of a fetishistic nature, but instead of removing the excesses there has been a total denial of their honor<sup>20</sup>. The theological motivation invoked was the second commandment of the Decalogue: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the earth. groundwater! Thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them, nor serve them ...” (Exodus 20, 4-5).

In the same year of Genesisios' visit (726 AD) there was an earthquake and a volcanic eruption northeast of the island of Crete, and Leo III Isaurus will interpret this calamity as a divine punishment caused by idolatry, understood by him as an honor of the icons. This was the reason for the onset of the iconoclastic crisis in the same year. As a result, the emperor will destroy the mosaic icon above the Bronze Gate of Constantinople, which represents the Savior Christ, and precedes by four years the iconoclastic imperial edict<sup>21</sup>. A public act with symbolic value, the emperor replaces the icon with a cross, which already betrayed his iconoclastic beliefs. At this moment a fierce opposition of the population, especially of the

<sup>19</sup> There are also specialists, such as Georg Beck, who state that iconoclastic heresy was not born in the imperial circles, but in the ecclesiastical ones, cf. Pr. E. BABUȘ, *Bizanțul istorie și spiritualitate*, p. 284.

<sup>20</sup> V. MUNTEANU, *Istoria creștină generală...*, pp. 197-198.

<sup>21</sup> The officers who tried to carry out the royal order were killed by the people, thus causing a powerful revolt, which resulted in many dead and wounded. The emperor ordered arrests, many people being convicted, mutilated and exiled. Cf. Pr. E. BABUȘ, *Bizanțul istorie și spiritualitate*, p. 286.

faithful, will arise in Constantinople, the women being more connected, one might say, with the veneration of the Holy Icons. A group of nuns led by St. Theodosia, in their attempt to defend the icon of the Savior, will become the first martyrs of the struggle for the defense of the Holy Icons. “A little later (another example): St. Antuza de Mantinea - a nun, too - was tortured, the embers of the burned icons being scattered on her head. In the next two years (728) the same Leon ordered that the icons of some churches be whitewashed (il. 25)”<sup>22</sup>.

Greece and the Cyclades revolted in 727 and proclaimed a new emperor, but in the end the revolt was defeated. It seems that this occasion determined the emperor to order the closure of the University of Constantinople, the burning of the library and the expulsion of the professors whom he could not persuade to support the iconoclastic movement.

Due to the strong reaction of the population, the emperor will try to seek an official justification for the iconoclasm, which will receive the consent of the Church. Failing to win over Pope Gregory II (715-731)<sup>23</sup> or Patriarch Gherman I of Constantinople, “a great and holy patriarch”<sup>24</sup> who asked for the convening of an ecumenical synod, and with the support of a part of the Eastern Episcopate, in 730, Leo III Isaurus will issue the only iconoclastic edict<sup>25</sup>, which will represent the legal basis for the removal of

<sup>22</sup> V. MUNTEANU, *Istoria creștină generală...*, p. 198.

<sup>23</sup> With Pope Gregory II, Emperor Leo III has an epistolary exchange, which shows his iconoclastic position on the worship of the holy icons, in contradiction with the fully orthodox position of the pope. Here is what the Byzantine emperor said: “Whoever opposes the ordinances of the Holy Fathers should bear anathema. Icons stand in the place of idols and those who honor them are idol worshippers. It is not permitted, as God commanded (Exodus 20: 4), to honor what is made by man’s hand, any resemblance of the one in heaven and the earth; prove to me, who taught us to honor the things made by human hands, and I will accept that it is God’s will. They (the iconodules) honor stones, walls and planks... I am the emperor and priest. How is it that at the six Synods nothing was said about icons?” See Papa Grigorie II, *Scrisoarea a II-a către împăratul Leon al III-lea*, Ediția Gouillard, rr. 294 și 198, cf. Pr. Dr. Ștefan NEGREANU, *Biserica Răsăritului și Apusului în secolul al IX-lea. Interferențe, conlucrare și controverse*, Editura Universității Aurel Vlaicu, Arad, 2012, pp. 25-26.

<sup>24</sup> Wladimir GUETTEE, *Papalitatea schimatică sau Roma în raporturile sale cu Biserica Răsăriteană*, translated by Iosif Gheorghian, Editura Biserica Ortodoxă, Alexandria, 2001, p. 181.

<sup>25</sup> This way, iconoclasm began an approved teaching by the emperor and the Church and taught as such. See Nicolae CHIFĂR, *Istoria creștinismului. I*, Editura Universității “Lucian Blaga”, Sibiu, 2007, p. 243.

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the icons and for the persecution of the believers who honored them. In his protest, the pope was also supported by the people of ancient Rome and wrote to the emperor that: “he has no right to decide on matters of faith and to introduce innovations in what we have from the Fathers”<sup>26</sup>.

Because for 13 years Patriarch Gherman of Constantinople could not persuade Leo III to give up his iconoclastic ideas, he will protest more and more, which will lead to a gradual tension in relations with the emperor. Therefore, in 730 the emperor will dismiss this patriarch, who did not sign the imperial edict iconoclast, fact which did not go unanswered in Rome, Pope Gregory III (731-741), anathematizing the iconoclasts next year<sup>27</sup>. In response, in 732 a number of bishops in Western Illyria, Sicily, and southern Italy passed from the jurisdiction of Rome to that of Constantinople, determining the papal see to orient itself from now on and seek protection from France. It can be seen how the rupture of relations between Rome and Constantinople was determined by the strong action of the emperor, who will imprison the papal legates in the capital and take the measures mentioned in connection with the dioceses of Illyria, which were not few (old and new). Epirus, Illyrian, Macedonia, Thessaly, Achaia, Dacia Ripensis and the Mediterranean, Moesia, Dardania and Prevalis with the metropolis of Scobra), Sicily and southern Italy<sup>28</sup>.

Between 730 and 741, which marks the end of the reign of Emperor Leo III Isaurus, there is no more viable information for his iconoclastic policy.

Historical data show that during the reign of Leo III the iconoclastic crisis did not generalize, we can not talk about a systematic destruction of the Holy Icons, as happened in 768, during the reign of Niceta, patriarch of Constantinople. Icons could still be seen in many churches in Constantinople, in the patriarchal palace, even though they were considered to have a more decorative than liturgical role. This state of affairs was maintained until the death of Emperor Leo III Isaurus<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Pr. E. BĂBUȘ, *Bizanțul istorie și spiritualitate*, p. 286.

<sup>27</sup> Pope Gregory the 2nd answered patriarch Ghermanos that he shared his convictions regarding the honouring of the holy icons. Thus, the support of the West was full for the easterners. Cf. Șt. NĚGREANU, *Biserica Răsăritului și Apusului în secolul al IX-lea...*, p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> N. CHIFĂR, *Istoria creștinismului. I*, p. 244.

<sup>29</sup> See N. CHIFĂR, *Istoria creștinismului. I*, p. 244.

#### IV. The iconoclastic edict of Caliph Yazid II (721 AD)

When we suggested, in the title of the study, that there might be an Arab iconoclasm, we referred to this edict of the Umayyad caliph Yazid II, who succeeded the leadership of the Arab Caliphate to ‘Umar II, between the years 720 -724 AD. But until this episode, there was a whole history of the banning on the representation of anthropomorphic images in Islam<sup>30</sup>.

Islam by definition is iconoclastic, forbidding any form of representation of divinity and, from this point of view, is consistent with itself, because not speaking of an incarnate God, it admits neither pictorial representations of divinity nor of persons considered holy<sup>31</sup>. But when we referred to the Arab iconoclasm, we referred to the fact that in this case it is an edict given to all the inhabitants of the Arab Caliphate, which meant that it was aimed exclusively at Christians, because neither Muslims nor Jews had pictorial representations in their worship. Therefore, it does not refer to the prohibition of painting human faces and worshipping them for believers of their own religion, who, in any case, would not have committed such a sacrilege - according to Islam, but are addressed to believers of another religion.

It can be said that the iconoclastic heresy equally affected the Christians left in the Byzantine Empire, but those already within the borders of the Arab Caliphate were not spared, the fight against the Holy Icons being a widespread phenomenon in that period. They all had to suffer persecution, but the difference was that if Christians fought for the protection of icons within the borders of the Byzantine Empire, there could be no such thing in the Arab Caliphate, as Christians had to wait for the death of the persecuting caliph.

The account of this episode of Umayyad history can be found in the study of K.A.C. Creswell, entitled *The Lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam*<sup>32</sup>, a study that presents a brief history of the origins of Islamic iconoclasm, but also of the partial acceptance of images.

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<sup>30</sup> See Jacques BROSE, *Maestrii spirituali*, translation by Iulia Mănescu, Pro Editură și Tipografie, București, 2007, p. 285.

<sup>31</sup> Exceptions are some representations of saints, imams, from the Shiite world, who without making a dogma from their pictorial representation, sometimes resort to this artistic process. However, anthropomorphic representations cannot be found in Shiite mosques either.

<sup>32</sup> See the study of K. A. C. CRESWELL, *The Lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam*, in: “Ars Islamica”, Vol. 11/12 (1946), pp. 159-166, but the study can be found of the volume *Early Islamic Art and Architecture*, edited by Jonathan M. BLOOM, Routledge Edition, 2017, pp. 62-73, from which we will quote.

**IV.1. Islamic iconoclasm - causes, short history**

The Islamic attitude towards the veneration of the Holy Icons has been influenced by the analogous conception of Judaism and has undoubtedly been influenced by it, but so far the prohibition of human representation is strictly observed, although not explicitly expressed in the Qur'an. In general, there is a frequent confusion, considering that there are Qur'anic passages that would explicitly forbid iconic representation, but such passages do not exist, as Orientalists have frequently pointed out. The first to say that the ban on paintings did not come from the Qur'an, but from the Hadith (Islamic Tradition) was H. Lavoix, in 1859, followed by other specialists in the field, such as: Pharaoh, Karabaček, De Nahuys, etc.<sup>33</sup>.

The Prophet of Islam stood from the beginning against iconic representation. However, there is an episode related by Azrakī, an author of the ancient Islamic period, who died in 858, according to which Muhammad, after the triumphal entry into his city of Mecca, during Ramadan from December 629-January 630, entered the Ka'ba and commanded to erase all the paintings there, but he laid his hands on a painting depicting the Mother of God with the baby Jesus in her arms and a painting depicting Abraham<sup>34</sup> and would have said, "Delete all the paintings except this one from under my hands", and Azrakī added that the painting remained there until 63 after Hegira<sup>35</sup>.

Even the rigorous (in terms of faith) Caliph 'Umar II used a censer inlaid with human representations (icons with the faces of saints, angels or representations of the Savior and the Mother of God) that he had brought from Syria for the incense of the mosque in Medina and it was used until 785, without disturbing anyone. It was not until that year that the iconic representations by order of the governor of Medina were erased. But this moment is linked to the historical framework of the end of the eighth century, when iconoclasm had already manifested itself throughout that century<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> H. LAVOIX, "Les Peintures musulmans", in: *Revue de l'Orient, de l'Algérie, et des colonies* (from now on ROAC), n.s., IX (1859), pp. 353-369.

<sup>34</sup> Barnaby ROGERSON refers to the picture of Abraham in: *Profetul Mahomed. O biografie*, translated by Alexandru Racu, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2015, p. 178.

<sup>35</sup> K. A. C. CRESWELL, "The Lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam", in: *Early Islamic Art and Architecture*, p. 62.

<sup>36</sup> K. A. C. CRESWELL, "The Lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam", in: *Early Islamic Art and Architecture*, p. 62.

It is known that both Caliph Mūāwiya and Caliph Abd al-Malik made coins with their effigies, following the model of the Byzantine and Persian ones, although from the point of view of the Islamic faith any anthropomorphic representation was forbidden. Recently, Zakī Hasan tried to explain the existence of graphic representations during the Umayyad dynasty, saying that “they did not take into account the straight and narrow path in terms of religion”, with the exception of ‘Umar II, who is said to have ruled in connection with a painting in a bathroom. He ordered it erased and exclaimed, “If I could at least find the one who painted it, I’d beat it up”<sup>37</sup>. Creswell suggests that the painting was indecent and that it was the real cause of ‘Umar’s anger, for, as has been seen, he had nothing against the human figures on the censer with which he incensed his mosque in Medina<sup>38</sup>.

Despite the silence of the Qur’an, the Hadith (the sayings of the prophet, in the broadest sense Islamic tradition) is constantly expressed against anthropomorphic pictorial representations<sup>39</sup>.

Regarding the veneration of the Holy Icons, two theologians of the time defend them by bringing important theological arguments. These are St. John of Damascus and Theodor Abū Qurra, bishop of Harran<sup>40</sup>. St. John opposes by all means, fighting a fierce battle with the iconoclasts, also because his position at the court of the Umayyad caliphate allowed him to do so, before retiring to the monastery, shortly before his death. St. John of Damascus came from an old family in Damascus, which played an important role in the system of state administration under Caliph Abd al-Malik and even under previous caliphs<sup>41</sup>. He worked between 700-750

<sup>37</sup> Sir Thomas W. ARNOLD, *Painting in Islam. A Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture*, Dover Publication INC, New York, 1965, pp. 1-40.

<sup>38</sup> See K. A. C. CRESWELL, “The Lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam”, in: *Early Islamic Art and Architecture*, p. 62.

<sup>39</sup> Henri LAMMENS, “L’Attitude de l’Islam primitif en face des arts figurés”, in: *Journal asiatique* (from now on JA) II-ème série VI (1915), pp. 239-279.

<sup>40</sup> About the two Fathers of the Church see C. CUȚARU, *Creștinism și islam în Evul Mediu...*, pp. 79-235.

<sup>41</sup> About the life of St. John of Damascus in the context of the spreading of the Islam see Daniel J. SAHAS, *Sfântul Ioan Damaschinul despre islam „erezia ismaeliților”*, translated by Dragoș Dâscă, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2015, and also Arhid. lect. univ. dr. Caius CUȚARU, “Viața Sfântului Ioan Damaschin în contextul răspândirii islamului în Orientul Mijlociu”, in: *Altarul Banatului*, XXVI (LXV) 4-6 (aprilie-iunie 2015), pp. 42-59.

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AD. According to Becker, St. John knew Islamic doctrine very well, his quotations from the Qur'an in Greek being often almost literal translations from the original, giving the true names of the quoted suras.

Theodor of Harran is the first Father of the Church to write some of his treatises in Arabic, and although he took some ideas from St. John of Damascus, he differs from him in that he includes Muslims among those who oppose icons. Although Muslims were not quoted directly, the almost literal quotation from the Islamic tradition (*hadith*) proves that the reference was about them, especially since the Muslims of the late eighth century were already very much related to their own tradition<sup>42</sup>.

Theodor Abū Qurra states that the Muslims were iconoclastic by respecting the Islamic tradition. This contradicts the theory put forward by Ch. Diehl<sup>43</sup> and O.M. Dalton<sup>44</sup>, who claimed that the iconoclastic movement, which was outlined by the edict of Leo III Isaurus in 726, was due to the defeats of iconic Byzantine armies by Muslim armies hostile to any representations of human forms. This theory is supported by the Byzantine scientist Wiet, who after recalling the decree of Yazid II, quotes the chronicler Michael the Syrian, who states that:

“The king of the Greeks, Leon, also ordered, following the example of the king of the Arabs, to pluck the icons from the walls, those of the saints, as well as those of the emperors and others.” “Michael the Syrian, adds Wiet, is logical with the Church's Tradition. It is known that at the Second Synod of Nicaea, held in 787, the bishops who condemned the iconoclasts assumed that the measures taken against the icons had been taken after the model of the Muslims”<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> See K. A. C. CRESWELL, “The Lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam”, pp. 63-64.

<sup>43</sup> See Charles DIEHL, *Manuel d'art byantin*, Librairie Alphonse Picard et fils, Paris, 1910, p. 336. After talking about the excesses that some Christians committed in the veneration given to the Holy Icons, Ch. Diehl, shows that: “There had to be a reaction to such excesses. The spread of Islam and its victories also helped the success of the hostile tendencies of the icons. Many believers, marked by the impressive victories of the unbelievers, saw in the defeats of Christians a proof of divine wrath, and by fighting against the icons, they believed that they were appeasing the displeasure of God”.

<sup>44</sup> Ormonde Maddock DALTON, *Byzantine Art and Archeology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1911, p. 13.

<sup>45</sup> G. WIET, “Introduction”, in: E. PAUTY, *Bois sculptés d'églises coptes*, Cairo, 1930, pp. 3-4, cf. K. A. C. CRESWELL, *The Lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam*, p. 64.

It is known that in the Islamo-Christian controversy of the first period, an important role was played, on the Muslim side, by the argument of the military successes of the armies of Islam against the Christians. Starting from here, the Muslim side tried to argue the superiority of the new religion over Christianity, the fact that the divine presence would implicitly indicate the truth of the faith. On the Christian side, the argument went in a completely different direction, in the sense that the defeats on the battlefield were nothing but signs of God's wrath against the sins of Christians, and divine providence, from this point of view, would do nothing else than to allow the victories of the unbelievers against the people of God, as happened in the history of the Old Testament with the divine punishments against the Jews when they deviated from the right path of worshipping the true God.

#### IV.2. The edict of Yazid II (721)

What was this decree of Caliph Yazid II? According to Theophanes († 818),

“A Jew from Latakia, rushing to Yazid, promised him a forty-year reign if he destroyed the Holy Icons that adorned the churches of Christians throughout the empire. But in the same year Yazid died, before the majority of the people could even hear this satanic order”<sup>46</sup>.

The edict was partially enforced only in Egypt, and when Yazid died in 724, his successor Hishām revoked it, so it produced no further effect on Christians, but it represented a first form of persecution of Christians for honoring the Holy Icons in The Arab Caliphate.

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<sup>46</sup> *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor, Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284-813*, translated with Introduction and Commentary by Cyril Mango and Roger Scott with the assistance of Geoffrey Greatrex, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 557. Theophanes places the death of Caliph Yazid II in 6215, that is, 724 AD. See “Chronique de Denys de Tell-Mahré, avec une traduction française, une introduction et des notes historiques et philologiques” par J.-B. CHABOT, in: *Bibliothèque de l'école des hautes études*, Librairie Émile Bouillon, Éditeur, Paris, 1895, p. 18.. Dionysius of Tell el Amarna fixes the death of Yazid between the years 726-727 AD, and Michael the Syrian, the chronicler and Jacobite patriarch of Antioch also remembers this episode. See *Chronique de Michel le Syrien patriarche jacobite d'Antioche*, Éditée et traduite en français par J.-B. CHABOT, Tome II, Ernest Leroux Éditeur, Paris, 1901, 457.

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From the documents of the VII Ecumenical Synod of Nicaea in 787, it appears that at the opening of the fifth session (October 4, 787), Patriarch Tarasius noted that the accusers of Christians imitated Jews, pagans, Samaritans, Manichaeans and theopascists in destruction of icons<sup>47</sup>. The monk John of Jerusalem, the representative of the bishops of the East, asked permission to correct these misconceptions and to clarify the origin of the attacks on the icons from the direct knowledge of the facts. The great Byzantinologist A.A. Vasiliev then reproduces the content of the written report of the priest John, which he prepared earlier [ἀπὸ πιτακίου ἀνέγνω]. The following is the content of this report<sup>48</sup>:

“I, the unworthy and the humblest of all, want to show before this Holy man and Holy Synod, in all truth [μετὰ πάσης ἀληθείας], how, when and where this very bad and God-hated heresy of the detractors of Christianity and iconoclasts began; and being anxious to use it as briefly as I could, I decided to read it to you from a written document so that I would not miss any element of the truth”. Then, after mentioning the death of Caliph Suleiman (715-717) and saying a few words about his successor Omar (Omar II, 717-720), John continued: “At the death of Omar II, Ezid followed him [Ἐζίδος, Yazid II, 720-724], a man with a frivolous and unstable mind. There lived a certain man from Tiberias, a leader of the Jews’ wicked [παρανόμων], a magician and fortune-teller, an instrument of soul-killing demons, whose name was Forty-Cubits (Tessaracontapechys = Τεσσαρακοη) forty

<sup>47</sup> K.A.C. CRESWELL, “The Lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam”, p. 65. Here is how Patriarch Tarasius introduced Hieromonk John of Jerusalem to the work of the Seventh Ecumenical Council: Now it will be right for us to sharpen our brother and beloved Lord (κύριος) John, the legate of the Apostolic See of the East, because he has with him a document that will explain how the misfortune of the icons began [πρόθεν ἤρξατο ἡ τῶν εἰκόνων κ. Α. Α. VASILIEV, “The Iconoclastic Edict of the Caliph Yazid II, A.D. 721”, in: *DOP*, vol. 9/10 (1956), p. 28.

<sup>48</sup> After consulting A. A. Vasiliev’s study entitled “The Iconoclastic Edict of the Caliph Yazid II, A.D. 721”, in: *DOP*, vol. 9/10 (1956), pp. 23-47, as well as its partial translation in the volume of Fr. prof. Univ. Dr. Alexandru STAN, *Studii bizantine. Relații canonice cu alte etnii și religii*, Moroșan Publishing House, Bucharest, 2016, pp. 170-176 and approving the correctness of the translation, I decided to take fragments from the translation made by the father teacher, with very small corrections.

cubits high<sup>49</sup>, a fierce enemy of the Church of God. Finding out about the frivolity [κυφότητα] of the Yazid ruler, this pre-corrupt Jew approached him and tried [ἐπεχείρει] to utter his prophecies ... saying, «You will remain in this reign for thirty years if you follow my counsel». That mad tyrant, longing for a long life (because he was lax and messy) replied, «Whatever you say, I am ready to do it, and if I fulfill my wish, I will reward you with the greatest honors». Then the Jewish magician [φαρμακομάντις] said to him: «Immediately order, without delay, that a circular letter [ἐγκύκλιον ἐπιστολήν] be sent throughout the empire with the effect that every representative painting [πίξ σί or on the mosaic or on the wall, on the holy vessels or on the altar coverings, and on all objects of this kind in the Christian Churches, to be destroyed and utterly abolished, and even representations of any kind [οἰαδήποτε] which adorn and beautify city markets [ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς πόλεων]». And moved by satanic wickedness, the false prophet added: «any resemblance», thereby planning to make his enmity against us unsuspected [ἀνοφώρατον].

The wretched tyrant, rather yielding to this counsel, sent [officials] and destroyed the holy icons and all other representations in every province under his dominion, and because of the Jewish magician, he ruthlessly plundered the churches of God from under his scepter of all ornaments before evil comes to this country [πρὸ τοῦ φθάσαι ἐν τῇ γῆ ταύτῃ τὸ κακόν]. Because Christian lovers of God fled, lest they themselves should throw away the holy icons with their own hands, the emirs sent for this purpose forced the service of odious Jews and cursed Arabs, and thus burned the honest icons, and sometimes defiled or they cleaned the church buildings.

Hearing this, the false bishop of Nacolia and his followers imitated the lawless Jews and the ungodly Arabs, angering the Churches of God... When, after doing so, Caliph [σύμβουλος] Ezid died, no more than two and a half years later, and gone into eternal fire, the icons were put back in their original position

<sup>49</sup> Mansi, XIII, 197 B, cf. *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et amplissima collectio*, Joanes Dominicus MANSI Archiepiscopus Lucensis, Editio Novissima, Tomus decimus tertius ab an MDCCLXXXVII usq.; ad an DCCCXIV incl., Florentiæ, MDCCLXVII.

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and honor. He was succeeded by his son, Walid (Οὐλίδος)<sup>50</sup>, and then came the short reign of Caliph Walid III (743-744).<sup>51</sup> Full of indignation, he ordered the magician to be subjected to an infamous death for killing his father, as a just punishment for his false prophecy. This was the report of the priest Ioan, the representative of the bishops of the East<sup>752</sup>.

Continuing the article, the Byzantinologist Alexander Alexandrovich Vasiliev, brings testimonies from Greek, Latin, Syriac, Armenian and Arabic sources to prove the authenticity of this iconoclastic edict of Yazid II and tries to establish a date for its issuance. According to the report of priest Ioan, two and a half years have elapsed since the date of issuing the edict until the death of the caliph, and if the date of Yazid's death is known (January 24, 724), it means that the year of issuing the iconoclastic edict is 721, half year, probably June or July<sup>53</sup>. The same year of the edict is confirmed by Patriarch Nichifor, Severus ibn al-Muqqaffa and a late Syriac chronicle. A. A. Vasiliev claims that the one who implemented the edict was Maslamas, Yazid's brother.

The account of the priest John of Jerusalem is an objective one, because it is made by someone who lived those deeds, Jerusalem and the whole territory of the Holy Land, being at that time inside the borders of the Arab Caliphate. For the veracity of the facts, in order to argue them better and give weight to them, he will make his document in writing, and during the 5th meeting of the VII Ecumenical Synod of Nicaea (787) he will present it to the Synod Fathers.

From his account we learn the reason why Caliph Yazid II issued the iconoclastic edict: the desire for revenge against Christians of other religions. Being a "man with a frivolous and unstable mind," the caliph was easily influenced, fact speculated by a Jew "magician and fortune-teller, an instrument of soul-killing demons" - as the priest John calls him, a cunning man, who in exchange for unfulfilled promises will cause the caliph to begin the persecution of the Holy Icons.

<sup>50</sup> Priest John misidentifies Caliph Walid as the successor of Yazid II, instead of naming Hisham the true successor. Walid II succeeded Hisham.

<sup>51</sup> It is about Walid II, who ruled the Arab Caliphate during this period.

<sup>52</sup> See Al. STAN, *Studii bizantine. Relații canonice cu alte etnii și religii*, pp. 170-172.

<sup>53</sup> See Al. STAN, *Studii bizantine. Relații canonice cu alte etnii și religii*, p. 172.

We can see that the iconic issue was posed at that time with great insistence on both sides of the borders between the Byzantine Empire and the Arab Caliphate, because we are only five years apart from the iconoclastic edict of Leo III Isaurus (726). The Jew nicknamed Forty-Cubits does nothing but take advantage of the mental instability and credulity of Yazid II and promises him what only God can offer: long life. As a “fierce enemy of the Church of God”, the Jew succeeds in causing the caliph to remove “every representational painting, whether on tablets or mosaics or on the wall, on holy vessels or on altar coverings, and on all objects of this kind found in the Christian Churches”. The destruction was to be total, not even the paintings in the city squares were to escape untouched, according to the testimony of the priest John.

Christians could not rebel in an empire whose dominant religion was an iconoclastic one by definition - Islam, forbidding any pictorial representation of any human being or deity. The struggle for icons was not possible in the caliphate, as was the case in Byzantium, for example. Therefore, the solution chosen by Christians was to leave their homes so as not to be put in the position of destroying their own icons. Probably only now did the Christians in the caliphate realize the mistake of giving in far too easily to the Muslim invasion, sometimes even without a fight, in order to get out of Byzantine tutelage, if we refer to non-Chalcedonian Christians.

The officials sent by the caliph, in each province, mercilessly destroyed “the holy icons and all the other representations”, “ruthlessly robbed the churches of God from under His scepter of all ornaments”. Those who actually committed such acts were “hateful Jews and cursed Arabs” - in the words of the priest John, “and thus burned the honest icons, and either defiled or cleansed the church buildings”.

In the two and a half years, the provisions of the edict were put into practice, but there are historians who say that this only happened in the province of Egypt, the other provinces being less affected, although according to John’s report the persecution of icons seems to have been generalized.

As the existence of every man is in the hands of God, the indulgence of divine providence caused the cunning Jew to have the fate of the destroyed icons, Caliph Walid commanding that “the magician be subjected to an infamous death... as a just punishment for his false prophecy”.

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Thus ended the iconoclastic episode in the Arab Caliphate, the icons being restored to the place of honor and reverence by Christians returning to their homes. In the Byzantine Empire, however, the struggle to defend the cult of the Holy Icons continued long after that.

## **V. Conclusions**

The iconoclastic crisis that broke out in the East was closely linked to the Christological problem, which required clarification for centuries, following the heresies that appeared regarding the divinity of the Savior, His humanity, as well as the way of hypostatic union. Unlike other heresies from the ecclesiastical environment, being initiated by priests (Arius, for example) or bishops (Nestorius), iconoclasm is the heresy initiated and sustained by Byzantine emperors in the eighth and ninth centuries, using also military force in this regard, which gives this heresy the violence and cruelty with which it was imposed.

Iconoclasm had several theological, cultural or socio-political causes. To these are added the emergence and spread of Islam, the last great monotheism to appear in history and which was iconoclastic by definition. The accusations that Islamic theology made about Christianity concerned the so-called Christian polytheism, through the worship of the triune God, but also the so-called Christian idolatry because of the veneration of the Holy Icons. Therefore, Father John Meyendorff believed that the emperors from the Eastern Byzantine Empire, in the eighth century, decided to purify Christianity to make it better able to withstand the attack of Islam. This explains their support for iconoclasm.