

ICONOCLASM: A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH¹

The discussion that started on social media regarding the artworks of George Gavriel went on for many days. However, the intense exchanges never truly touched upon the *essence* of the artworks. Instead, the discussion remained superficial, ensnared in the sensationalism of moral panic/indignation, which followed the accusations for blasphemy circulated by the *National Popular Front*.² The saga culminated in public death threats against the painter, the Archbishop's public intervention requesting the painter's sacking, and the ensuing disciplinary inquiry started by the Ministry of Education.

"He outraged public decency! He insulted the sacred and the holy!" they repeated over and over, without explaining *how*, without producing any justification or evidence. Why was there a lack of explanation? In my opinion, it was not accidental an omission. Rather, it was a deliberate *avoidance* of producing evidence- a halting of dialectic and speech. And that is because only a superficial interpretation of the paintings serves the ideological apparatuses of the State: the Church of Cyprus, the education system, the news media, even the social media. The reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology could only be reached through demonization, atavism, oversimplification and reduction. This is how they managed to cover up the contradictions underlying the ideological apparatuses of the state, which however, we have a duty to point out, because this is where the battle takes place: the resistance of the exploited is able to find its means also by utilizing their contradictions.³ Allow me therefore to make a theological digression.

Did the image of the naked Jesus offend his hypostasis? Did it offend the doctrine of the Incarnation? The Archbishop's reaction was iconoclastic, taking the Church centuries back, to iconoclasm. His iconoclasm was expressed as an anti-representational tendency⁴ ("it is blasphemous for Jesus to be depicted naked"), with remnants of monophysitism.

The depiction of Jesus's nudity can be justified by the iconophile Christology of St. John of Damascus, which glorifies the materiality of Jesus and supports the *anagogical* role of the icon (where the icon is the means to a transcendence, not a photograph or an accurate portrait, and is, hence, not blasphemous).⁵ The depiction of Jesus's nudity can also be supported by the Christology of St. Theodore the Studite.

¹ This is the opening speech (translated from Greek) I gave at the solo exhibition of Greek-Cypriot painter (and school teacher), George Gavriel, on 9 October 2020 at Gallery Gloria in Nicosia (Cyprus). The painter had come under fire because one of his paintings depicted a naked Jesus and another depicted a dog urinating on a statue of the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus. He was accused of blasphemy, the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus publicly requested that the Ministry of Education fired him. As a result, the Ministry of Education opened a disciplinary investigation, which was still ongoing at the time of this speech. For more information on the case, see <https://cyprus-mail.com/tag/george-gavriel/>

² Far-right, ultra-nationalist party in Cyprus, an offshoot of the Greek party *Golden Dawn*.

³ See Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Monthly Review Press, 1971.)

⁴ See "Iconoclasm", *Papers Given at the Ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, University of Birmingham, March 1975, Eds. Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin, Centre for Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham.

⁵ See Pallis, Dimitrios. "A Critical Presentation of the Iconology of St. John of Damascus in the Context of the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversies", *HeyJLVI* (2015), pp. 173-191.

Iconoclasm was a conflict of ideas as well as politics. On the level of ideas, the iconoclasts are the epigones of Plato—those who devalue the body, the senses and the representations.⁶ [4] For them, the history of art begins with ontological irreverence. The very basis of art *is* irreverence: irreverence towards the “idea of the Divine”, which is “distorted” by the pictorial representation. Therefore, they reject the body, as well as the realism of the icon. This puritanism, however, is not consistent with the Christian “economy of Incarnation” and the transcendent relations established by the icons.

On the political level, iconoclasm was motivated by the imperialism of Emperor Leo III, an iconoclast who aimed at subjugating and integrating monks within an imperial theocratic model.⁷ The monks venerated the icons. The icon allowed them a direct relation with the divine, which rendered the Empire’s function as an unnecessary mediator. Leo’s authoritarianism explains why it was the monks rather than any other group, who resisted the Emperor and the iconoclast politics.⁸ Something similar happened in this case with the Archbishop of Cyprus, who wanted to control the depictions of Jesus, among other things he controls.

Let’s move on from the contradictions of the Church of Cyprus. Let the Church arbitrarily oppose depictions of a naked Christ without Christological justification; let them make as many hermeneutic mistakes as they wish. Are G. Gavriel’s depictions *actually* blasphemous, though? The fact remains that other Christian denominations *allow* for naked depictions of Jesus, it’s part of their aesthetics, and the Ministry of Education or the state in general cannot forbid the aesthetic of other Christian denominations.

In Catholicism, there are over one thousand Renaissance paintings depicting Jesus’s penis.⁹ Scholars argue that Renaissance artists painted Jesus’s penis for the exact purpose of emphasising his human nature, consolidating the economy of the incarnation. At the same time, they support that the Byzantines’ puritanism managed to “decarnify the Incarnation itself”.¹⁰ Moreover, as far as the hypothetical issue of shame is concerned (whether Jesus was ashamed of his nudity), the scholars note that the depiction of his nudity can be justified in two ways: (a) Jesus is like humans in every respect *except* for sin, and hence, as sinless, he has no shame; (b) Jesus is depicted in the prelapsarian state, that is before the fall and the creation of guilt. In either case, nudity is destigmatized.

As regards Gavriel’s depictions of Jesus on the football field, the Pournara Refugee Camp, on a motorcycle: examples of such ordinary depictions of Jesus exist in Liberation Theology, an interdoctrinal movement in Latin America. It is a movement which bears the same political tendency of decentralisation –the same tendency that motivated monks in the 8th century. It is a movement that represents the struggles of marginalized, oppressed, and scorned social classes in order to claim

⁶ See Strezova, Anita. “Christianity and Late Antiquity”, *Journal of the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 12, issue 36 (Winter 2013): 228-258; see also Pallis, Dimitrios. “A Critical Presentation of the Iconology of St. John of Damascus in the Context of the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversies”, *HeyJLVI* (2015), pp. 173-191.

⁷ Pallis, Dimitrios. “A Critical Presentation of the Iconology of St. John of Damascus in the Context of the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversies”, *HeyJLVI* (2015), p. 176.

⁸ See McGuckin, John. A. “The Theology of Images and the Legitimation of Power in Eighth Century Byzantium”, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 37:1 (1993), pp. 39-58.

⁹ See Steinberg, Leo. *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁰ See Millner, J. Matthew. “The Sexuality of Christ in Byzantine Art and in Hypermodern Oblivion”. Presentation at University of Chicago, January 2014.

<https://voices.uchicago.edu/religionculture/2014/01/25/the-sexuality-of-christ-in-byzantine-art-and-in-hypermodern-oblivion/>

and express their faith in the way they want to, under their own terms, to make Jesus *their own*, and liberate themselves.

This is why they, too, depict Jesus in different moments of the daily *life*. Thus, in the struggle between life and death, the movement takes the side of life against death. The source of joy for the faithful who feel the love of God, is the realisation that in history, it is *life and not death* that gets to have the final say.¹¹

Antonis Balasopoulos comments that G. Gavriel's works are also "organised around the struggle between life and death", where it is life and not death that gets to have the final say in history. It is life that grounds history, not death.

At this point, we must turn to the paintings themselves in order to justify our interpretation. Let's look at the paintings that depict the Archbishop and Grivas. First of all, "the depicted dog is not urinating on the Archbishop [or Grivas] for the simple reason that dogs do not urinate on living humans. It is urinating on the Archbishop as a statue; it is urinating on necrosis – the type of death caused by institutionalisation". This means that ontologically, one is an alive being which moves - the dog - and the other is dead, "buried under the gold-laced surplice, holding the mobile phone through which financial deals are being made". This leads to the conclusion that here, a "monumentalised" power, "dead, frozen in rigor mortis" is being depicted, "and that the painter is taking the side of life against death- a deeply political action. On the opposite side is Jesus, alive, who 'by death he hath overcome death'".¹²

The insolence of life, a life that continuously transcends limits, permeates G. Gavriel's works. A transcendence established by the anagogical role of the icon. This means that the interpretation of the icon must transcend "literalism", which remains at the superficial level. "Literalism" maintains that the literal and the superficial is the only level of interpretation that matters, and concludes that the only thing that is going on in the aforementioned painting is that the painter is urinating on the Archbishop.¹³ But the icon utilises imagination in order to transcend spatiotemporal restrictions, much like in G. Gavriel's floating rocks series.

On the opposite side of G. Gavriel's political works, we find nihilism, the annihilation of ordinary life, and thanatophile nationalism—a nationalism that "takes justifies itself with blood".¹⁴ Where others justify with blood, we justify with dialectic.

Thank you.

Friday, 9 October 2020
Gallery "Gloria", Nicosia, Cyprus.

¹¹ See Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Egleston (New York: Orbis Books, 1973).

¹² As quoted from Antonis Balasopoulos's Facebook page. Quoted with the permission of the author.

¹³ From a public note published on Φοίβος Παναγιωτίδης' Facebook page.

¹⁴ Excerpt from Eleni Sioufta's speech, teacher, 28th October 2019.