

Keeping Everyone on Board: Gregory the Great’s ‘Theory of Iconoclasm’

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Pope Gregory the Great (s. 590–604) wrote two letters to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles, reproaching his acts of iconoclasm that had led to schism in his community. These short documents are considered to contain Gregory’s theory of art as a book for the illiterate and have been criticized for destroying the aura of sacred art to all subsequent Western developments. Here, I argue that the pope’s fundamental contribution is to offer instead a theory of iconoclasm. Relying on previous ideas about the pedagogical and communicative power of art and its ability to reach a larger audience beyond the elite, Gregory defends the rights of the community of ‘gentiles and illiterates’ who find in portable painted panels an expression of their identity in the church at Marseilles. Serenus’s wish to impose a superior orthodoxy on the pious if incorrect habits of his flock cannot justify his resorting to iconoclasm. The pope’s vigorous condemnation protects the vulnerable minority and sets an important precedent against any acts of iconoclasm in the West.

Recent studies on the phenomenon of iconoclasm have highlighted the social and political import of this recurrent phenomenon in history. The scale of the 2001 destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, for example, has prompted a number of analyses on the act as a combination of narcissistic self-affirmation and defiance of international law and standards, which promptly received condemnation by official international bodies (Francioni and Lenzerini 2003). Moreover, the offence was deliberately aimed at attacking the dignity of a religious minority (Braarvig 2014). Although the proportions of the damage that Serenus, bishop of Marseilles, inflicted on sacred images in his own cathedral during the winter of 598–599 CE might not be comparable to effacing the ancient giant statue of Buddha by the terrorists’ dynamite, the incident nevertheless caused a commotion strong enough for the news to reach Rome. Piétri (2002) considers this one of the earliest episodes of iconoclasm.

So far, however, the two letters that Pope Gregory the Great (s. 590–604) wrote to Serenus concerning his improper iconoclastic behaviour have been scrutinized and criticized as expressing the pope's 'theory of art' (Chazelle 1990, with previous literature). Written in June 599 and October 600 respectively (Ep. 9 and Ep. 11: ed. Norberg 1982: 768, 873–876; tr. Chazelle 1990: 139–140), the letters contain the pope's influential and encompassing dictum that art is 'the book of the illiterate' (Brown 1999: 18), used as a shorthand for a long-standing Western position about the exclusively didactic function of figural art. The pope's documents are considered as the origin of this enduring position (Mews and Renkin 2013: 331). Their formulation of a theory of art is considered elusive, restrictive, insensitive to art's potential, if not downright incoherent (Duggan 1989; Jensen 2000: 3). In short, the pope is held responsible for forever depriving Latin worshippers of the mystical presence of icons, in contrast to such use in Eastern Christianity (Viladesau 2000: 135–136; Carnes 2018: 185–186).

In this article, I argue that Gregory did not invent in these letters any 'theory of art', and that it was not his aim to articulate any such theory. Rather, relying on pre-existing notions about art and its use within a sacred context, the pope expounded a powerful 'theory of iconoclasm': by indicting Serenus's icon breaking, Gregory unilaterally condemned iconoclasm as a means of conflict resolution. From this perspective, the contrast with either aniconic or mystical understandings of visuality with respect to the pope's dictum is fundamentally misconceived. While the pope drew largely from a common understanding of what art does and is there for, the essence of his action consisted of recognizing the identity value of the images that Serenus wished to eliminate from sight.

Gregory did not defend art by defining it as 'the book of the illiterate'. Rather, he intervened in order to defend those 'illiterates and gentiles' whose identity was jarringly projected by the use of a specific form of art – the portable painted panel – into the largely aniconic church of Marseilles. Even as this group of people was being bullied out of existence by their purist, intransigent bishop, through his zealous destruction of their cherished sacred images, the pope rallied to their defence. He did so by appealing to Roman law, whose call to civilized and fair response to differences in customs his office represented, espoused, appropriated and upheld.

Implementing Roman Law

Pope Gregory simply condemned image destruction on legal grounds as infringement of property rights. The pope said to Serenus, 'we judge (*iudicamus*) that you should not have broken these very images' (Ep. 9), employing the legal language of judgment. It is the breaking of these particular images, likely portable panel paintings, rather than Serenus's anxiety at their proper use, that is blameworthy. In his second letter, Gregory sounds less lenient towards Serenus's zeal. He describes it as '*inconsiderate*', which can be translated as 'thoughtless, not pondered', but that also coincides with our word 'inconsiderate' – someone whose sensitivity to other

people's point of view is wanting. Here the subject of the paintings is specified further, as representing 'holy persons'. Celia Chazelle points out that '*sanctorum*' in Gregory's vocabulary is not limited to 'saints' as we understand this word but included both biblical and post-biblical characters and stories (Chazelle 1990: 141). If the subject-matter manifested in the pictorial expression refers to holy people, how can its destruction be justified? The pope's emphasis, however, is not in defending the topics of the paintings, but in guaranteeing the rights of those who make use of them within Serenus's community.

Peter Brown suggests a comparison between Serenus's case and that of a converted Jew at Cagliari, who, after receiving baptism, went back to his synagogue and installed in it sacred images (Brown 1999: 19). Apparently, (hypothetical) forced conversions at Marseilles might have led Serenus to forestall image enthusiasm in his diocese. If this were the case, Serenus's overt upholding of the synagogue's aniconic stance might have favoured these converts' transition to an equally imageless cultic setting. But in fact the Cagliari episode exposes the enthusiasm of the new convert from Judaism that paradoxically made him more Christian than the Christians in his attitude to images. The convert's iconic show of anti-Jewish polemics conveniently obliterated the Jewish aspect of his new catholic faith. Gregory intervenes in the Cagliari episode by having the offending objects quickly removed from the synagogue so that the Jewish community could safely return to use their cultic space (Katz 1933: 123–124).

Gregory showed experience in dealing with other communities' sacred sites in the case of several disputed synagogues. As Katz (1933) has demonstrated, in these cases Gregory applied Roman law to the disputes taken to him for resolution by the Jewish community and ruled in their favour against Christian claims to close or adapt synagogues to Christian use. Gregory applied Roman and canon law to safeguard property that did not belong to the church. Fundamentally, not even pagan idols could be freely torn apart by Christians, in part because they belonged to other communities as their property, and in addition because they were considered numinous presences in themselves.

Just as Gregory defended the rights of Jewish communities to access places of cult without being hassled by Christian proselytism, so too with the two letters to Serenus he defended a group (or groups) within the Marseilles congregation who saw themselves effectively persecuted by their bishop for their veneration of images. Although the letters are addressed to the bishop, it is his diverse congregation that Gregory has in mind.

Art and Identity: A Cause for Schism

Prima facie, the causal link that Herbert Kessler established between image destruction and Gregory's dictum nails the interpretation of the Serenus episode. Kessler affirms that, '[a]ccording to the venerable pope, like other material things, pictures must not be adored, but they should also not be destroyed *because* representations of

sacred events and saintly persons *are useful* “for teaching the faith to gentiles and illiterate Christians” (Kessler 2006: 152; emphasis added), who read in them what they cannot read in books.

Kessler explains that the motive for the pope’s opposition to Serenus’s iconoclasm is the fact that he found images to be a useful teaching instrument. On the contrary, I have argued that it is the pope’s concern ‘for gentiles and illiterates’ that motivates his condemnation of his bishop’s inconsiderate action. The pope wants these groups to remain part of a church where images are allowed, ideally only in a limited pedagogical function in order to avoid accusations of magic in line with biblical precepts and fears of idolatry (Markus 1997: 177). Therefore, the pope does not wish to enforce on Serenus a new understanding of images, but his primary concern is to impose on the bishop a principle of respect and tolerance for diversity of views and practices within his church.

According to basic Roman law, one should not break other people’s property whatever one’s inclinations or motivations to do so. Cases included instances when that property could be considered an idol. Gregory’s position upholds civilized manners whatever the religious conviction. In so doing, he guarantees the rights of minorities, or perhaps, in the case of Serenus’s congregation, that of people less in high-standing with the ruling authorities, including the ecclesiastical hierarchy. ‘Gentiles and illiterates’ were seeing their identities attacked or erased by such acts of iconoclasm as the bishop of Marseilles had perpetrated.

Gregory’s poor explanation of a definition of art depended not so much on the constraints of the epistolary context, admittedly not the place for a full-blown treatise on aesthetics, but even more radically on his reliance on the fact that this explanation was already current and even commonplace. Gregory took it out of a toolbox that he believed he shared with Bishop Serenus, so that he needed no more than an allusion to this rationale in order for it to be understood by the reluctant bishop. The pedagogical value of art functioned as the smallest common denominator in the rational persuasion Gregory employed to ensure the bishop acquired a more open view towards the use of images. His second rejoinder, a little over a year later, goes into the matter a little more deeply because the pope wants to provide guidance to Serenus himself on how to redeem the disastrous situation of schism he had since provoked through his iconoclastic actions.

In an elegant turn of phrase worthy of Augustine’s rhetoric, Gregory describes the duty of the shepherd who should ‘not [have] dispersed the flock that had been gathered but instead gathered the one dispersed, so that the name of the pastor would deservedly excel in you, and the condemnation of dispersor would not have fallen on you’ (Ep. 11). Short of transforming the painted panels at Marseilles into paintings not-made-by-human-hand (*acheiropita*: Lingua, 2011) in order to uphold their holy status, Serenus could, from his point of view, only try to eliminate them by force. This iconoclastic solution was not only against the law, Roman or canonical, but it was also inappropriate to a shepherd of Christ, a bishop, whose task was to gather Christ’s dispersed flock rather than cause it to scatter further. Gregory provided a different yardstick to evaluate his situation: a theory of iconoclasm.

Although subsequent thinkers, down to our days, have exploited these two letters to construct Gregory's theory of art, through which he is held responsible for the evolution of sacred art in the West, I contend that his achievement in this representative episode is to have condemned outright, and therefore largely forestalled and prevented, outbreaks of iconoclasm in the Latin-speaking church. By acknowledging that destruction of art appealed to an intransigent streak of high prelates and that it could be imposed top-down (as later happened in Byzantium), Gregory set in motion a counter-movement to legitimize and redeem the role of visuality in a religion of the invisible (Daley 2018). While this episode of iconoclasm reveals the many-sided role of images as identity-carriers (Featherstone 2009), the pope did not need to wait for violence as an index of the value of representation.

A miniature of Christ in Majesty from the wonderfully illuminated eleventh-century Hitda Codex declares to be 'the visible image [that] represents the invisible truth' (Hessische Landes- und Hochschulbibliothek, Darmstadt MS 1640, fol. 7r, Beuckers 2013). It can be taken as a statement of Western iconicity. Gregory's pedagogical dictum did not crush the essence of images or limit other uses for them – images did not become mechanical word-pictures as in Protestant catechisms. But his dealing with Serenus did prevent a virulent controversy, such as Byzantine iconoclasm, from exploding within the Western church, despite very similar premises and outcomes.

Conclusion

As with many instances of iconoclasm throughout history (Freedberg 2021), parallels can be drawn between Serenus's Marseilles episode and the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan. Like the Taliban, Serenus was guilty of fundamentalist extremism and incivility; like the Buddha, the images destroyed embodied the approach of one community to the sacred that should have commanded respect, whatever the reputed correctness of other possible approaches; like the UNESCO, Pope Gregory the Great reacted in order to establish the fundamental principle of inalienability of property, without hesitating to underscore the incivility of Serenus's act of iconoclasm, condoning none of his bishop's attitudes and actions in the name of correct theology. Seen from this perspective, the documents of this sixth-century episode of iconoclasm, consisting of two letters from the pope to the bishop of Marseilles, can be read as Gregory's 'theory of iconoclasm'.

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