JUAN PLAZAOLA

EL ANICONISMO DEL ARTE PALEOCRISTIANO

(En el duodécimo centenario del 11 Concilio de Nicea)

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Translation from Spanish into English

Note to the reader:

I understand that this article will be read by several people throughout the length and breadth of what we call the internet; therefore, I must make some things clear:

A) Although Spanish, the original language of this article, is my mother tongue and I have an academic command of it, and at the same time my level of English is advanced, since I have achieved higher education in a field where English is needed, knowing two languages does not mean being able to translate professionally. Translation is a discipline in itself and requires much more than just an advanced knowledge of a language. Also, it would be the norm for a native English speaker, who knows Spanish, to translate this document into English. That is, the language into which one translates should, in theory, always be the native language. Nonetheless, I could not find a translation of this work into English, so I decided to do it myself.
B) The author transliterates Greek words into Spanish on some occasions, and I will not transliterate them into English because it would be beyond my task.
C) The author quotes a few times, without translating, phrases in French. Although I can translate them because I also know the French language, I will not venture to do so, and I will leave it under the responsibility of each reader.
D) The footnotes which are Latin quotations, I will leave untranslated as I am not competent for such an undertaking.
E) Footnotes that are in a language other than Spanish, I will not translate them either.
F) In the case of footnotes that quote in Spanish some work of a church father, I will look for the text in some reputable English translation and substitute it.

The link to the original text is the following:
https://studylib.es/doc/9194281/17348-texto-del-art%C3%ADculo-39466-1-10-20211007--1-

JUAN PLAZAOLA

THE ANICONISM OF PALEOCHRISTIAN ART

(On the twelfth centenary of the 11th Council of Nicaea).
of Nicaea)

As I write these pages -October 1987- it is precisely twelve centuries since the famous *horos* of the Second Council of Nicaea on images. It is strange that this ephemeris has passed almost unnoticed in the circles of scholars of archeology, history and theology of the Church.

Among the few commemorative celebrations of this twelfth centenary, the International Colloquium was held at the Collège de France (Paris) on October 2, 3 and 4, 1986, with the participation of 35 speakers representing various Christian confessions. The reading of the Proceedings of this Colloquium[1] and of the extensive literature to which they refer have prompted me to approach a fascinating topic that is still fascinating and still considered quite problematic: that of images in the art of the first centuries of Christianity.

The first of the papers published in the Proceedings is devoted to this specific topic. Its author is Mary Charles Murray, Professor of Theology at the University of Nottingham, whose competence in the subject was well demonstrated in an extremely well-documented study, published ten years ago, on art in the early Church.[2]

In substance, the objective of both this 1977 work and the paper presented in Paris in 1986 can be considered scientifically revolutionary: to demonstrate that the alleged hostility against art on the part of the official Church in the early centuries is erroneous.

As a contribution to the twelfth centenary of Nicaea II, we thought it appropriate to revisit, in the light of the most recent studies, the thesis of the aniconism of the first Christian art and its coherence with the early patristic texts. We will first present (I) what has been called the traditional thesis; then (II), the criticism that this thesis has deserved from the author cited above; (III) our criticism of her criticism, to conclude (IV) with an essay of synthetic compilation.

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[1] E. BOESPFLUG, N. LOSSKY (ed.), Nicée II (787-1987). Douze siècles d'images religieuses. Actes du Colloque International Nicée 11, tenu au Collège de France, Paris, les 2, 3 et 4 Octobre 1986, Les Editions du Cerf, París 1987, 515 p.

[2] SISTER M . CHARLES MURRAY, Art and the Early Church: JTS 28 (1977} 303-345

I. THE TRADITIONAL THESIS

The thesis that sustains the hostility against images on the part of the ecclesiastical leaders of the first centuries, and which we here call traditional, is supported by various arguments, some perhaps somewhat aprioristic, but others based on sufficiently verified archaeological data and on literary texts whose authenticity can hardly be doubted.

1. First of all, the rootedness of early Christianity in a Jewish culture and tradition suggests that early Christians would feel obliged to respect the Second Commandment of the Mosaic Law: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" [3]- It is true that the parallel biblical passages [4] and their context suggest that the prohibition was not absolute, but referred to images intended or prone to be worshiped as divinities.

A few years before the Christian era, a Jew learned in the Greek language and thought wrote in the Book of Wisdom: "We are not led astray by the human creations of a perverse art, nor by the useless works of painters, figures smeared with variegated colors, whose contemplation awakens passion in the foolish who burn for a body without breath nor life. Lovers of evil, those who create them, are worthy of such vain hopes, those who covet them, those who worship them" [5]-.

º In the minds of the first followers of Christ nourished by Jewish tradition, figurative art was linked to idol worship. On the other hand, Jesus of Nazareth himself had not said or done anything that could, in this area, be interpreted as an innovation. Rather, Jesus had announced, together with the liquidation of the material temples, a worship "in spirit and in truth".[6]

2. And if we turn to sectors close to non-Jewish cultures, we find that for the first ecclesiastical writers, many of them nourished by Neoplatonism, the material image had no meaning, because the true image of God was Christ Jesus, and also the man sanctified by grace. [7]

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[3] Ex 20:4ff; Deut 5:8.

[4] Lev 26:1; Deut 6:13ff; Ps 96.

[5] Wisd 15,4-5.

[6] Jn 4,23.

[7] ORIGEN, Contra Celsum, VIII, 17ss.; PG 11, MINUCIUS FELIX, Octavius, XXXII; PL 3, 354; LACTANTIUS, Instit., 11, 2; PL 6, 259-260.

Tatian (c. 120-c. 173), an Easterner who had seen many Greek statues and <<He had laughed before them >> [8], he attacks them above all for being the glorification of sin; but, at the same time, his condemnation falls on art in general. As one commentator has written, "If the Church had adopted the fanaticism of Tatian, she would not have returned to those bagatelles which are works of art. "[9]

The argument of Aristides, an apologist of the same century, reveals the strong sense of transcendence probably inherited from Judaism, and on which the resistance of the first three Christian centuries to all imagery must have been based: What honor can be given to the divinity, essentially invisible, by attributing to it a visible body? [10]

St. Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 208), an oriental of Asia Minor, transferred to the West and Bishop of Lyon, only sees in the religious imagery a pagan custom, and condemns the disciples of Carpocrates who give true cult to the images of Christ and to the effigies of the philosophers [11].

At the juncture of the II-III centuries, in the West we still find no evidence of images that existed at that time; on the other hand, there are several texts that reflect a clear prevention or hostility against figurative art.

Certainly, the arguments with which Minicius Felix satirizes pagan idols can be equally valid against Christian icons, particularly if they are sculptures [12]-.

Tertullian (155-220) reminds the faithful of the Mosaic tradition [13], although he seems to feel compelled to explain why some visual representations of the Old Testament (such as the bronze serpent in the desert or the golden angels in the Ark) did not contravene that Law, since they did not lend themselves to idolatry" [14]- In his book on the Spectacles, he states that since the Lord "forbids that any kind of images, how much more will he forbid images of himself? "[15]

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[8] Adv. Graecos, XXXIV; PG 6, 875.

[9] CHARLY CLERC, Les théories relatives au culte des images chez les auteurs grecs du JI siècle, París 1915, p. 138.

[10] Apol., XIII, 3.

[11] Adv. Haer., 1, XXV, 6; PG 7, 685.

[12] Octavius, 24, 1; PL 3, 312: «Quanto verius de diis vestris animalia multa naturaliter iudicant! Mures, hirundines, milvi non sentire eos sciunt; rodunt, inculcant, insident, ac nisi aligatis, in ipso dei vestri ore nidificant; araneae vero faciem eius intexunt et de ipso capite sua fila suspendunt. Vos tergitis, mundatis, eraditis, et illos ... quos facitis, protegitis et timetis.»

[13] Adv. Marcionem, IV, 22; PL 2, 413-414; De ido/., IVss.; PL 1, 665-666.

[14] Adv. Marcionem, 2, 22; PL 2, 337

[15] De spect., 13; PL 1, 721.

In the same period, in the East, Clement of Alexandria (150-220), after denouncing the obscenity of pagan statues and paintings, contrasts the attitude of Christians to whom he applies the Second Commandment of the Law [16], censures the lie of the pretended representative power of the arts, comparing artists to grifters [17], and in reproaching women, in this work, for their eagerness to look at themselves in the mirror, reminds us once again that Moses forbade the making of images resembling God [18].

As for the prolific writer Origen (185-254), his rejection of material images is evident and logical. Origen insists on the *eikon* of God in man, and puts it in contrast with the sensible representations of the divinity. The true statue or image of God is man who is sanctified and "configured according to the image of God the Creator", and the most perfect image is "that which is raised in our Savior; it was He who said: The Father is in me" [19]-.

3."Christian art," Dom Henri Leclercq has written, "owes little to the Church, hardly tolerance, because it entered it as an intruder, and in such a limited way, so modest, that it took time to realize that it existed and that it wanted to live, to last and to be recognized. When that ambition was understood, it was too late to fight it and discouraged it. "[20]

Indeed, despite the recriminations of apologists, pedagogues and theologians, the symbol, the allegory, the figure and even the historical scene were appearing on the walls of the catacombs and on the slabs of the sarcophagi, winning the imagination and sensitivity of Christians. A text of Tertullian refers to the Good Shepherd represented on some Christian vessels [21] , and Clement speaks of the figures engraved on the rings of the faithful [22], and almost from that time (between the years 230-260) are the oldest figures that we have preserved on the walls of the cemeteries and in the sarcophagi.

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[16] Cohort. ad gentes, IV; PG 8, 161-162.

[17] Strom., VI; PG 8, 687

[18] Paedag., 111, 2; PG 8, 220.

[19] Contra Celsum VIII, 17; PG 11, 1544 Images and votive offerings appropriate for God, which have not been made by vulgar workmen, but which are made clear and formed in us by the divine Logos, are the virtues which are copies of the firstborn of all creation. For in him there are patterns of righteousness, prudence, courage, wisdom, piety, and the other virtues. Accordingly, there are images in all who, according to the divine word, have made for themselves prudence, righteousness, courage, wisdom, piety, and the products of the other virtues. We are persuaded that it is fitting for them to give honour to the prototype of all images, 'the image of the invisible God'. Quoted from the translation by Henry Chadwick, Cambridge University Press, Reprint 1965, p. 464 (In the original Spanish the translation used is by Ruiz Bueno, BAC, 1967, p.534)

[20] DACL, t. VII, Images, t. VII, p. 182.

[21] De pudic., VII; PL 2, 1000

[22] Paedag., III, 11; PG 8, 246-247

The fact that despite this anti-iconic attitude, shown by those who could represent the thinking of the hierarchy, that images were infiltrating early Christian art is traditionally explained by an intrusion of pagan customs, an intrusion that would have occurred through the mediation of the laity, in opposition to the official thinking of the hierarchy.

4. At the beginning of the 4th century, both in the East and in the West, it was necessary to remind ordinary Christians of the official custom of the Church.

In Elvira of Spain (ancient Illiberis, near Granada), a local synod between 305-312 judged it convenient to prohibit images, at least in places of worship:«Picturas in ecclesiis esse non debere, ne quod colitur et adoratur in parietibus depingatur.»

This canon annoyed counter-reformationist writers such as Baronius, who pretended to consider it apocryphal, and Bellarmine, who tried to find a convenient interpretation, saying that the synod of Elvira wanted only to avoid the irreverence of the Gentiles at a time of persecution, since it referred only to a mural iconographic art. Still in the last century the famous archaeologist Rossi was of the same opinion. According to him, one essential word should be underlined in the canon: "Picturas in ecclesiis." But the text does not support this interpretation, since it immediately seems to suggest the reason for such a prohibition: "So that what is worshipped and adored may not be painted on the walls".

5.A few years later, around 324, in the East we have the famous letter of the historian Eusebius of Caesarea to Princess Constantius, sister of the Emperor, who had written to him asking him to obtain for her a supposed image of Jesus.

In his letter, Eusebius draws her attention to the distinction between the image of Christ in his eternal pre-existence and the "figure of a servant" that he adopted at the Incarnation. Naturally, the princess asked him for a representation of the Savior's earthly image. And Eusebius makes her see that such a demand is not legitimate, because the divinity never left the Savior during his earthly existence (as demonstrated in the Transfiguration) and his present state after the Resurrection rules out any attempt to depict Christ in material form.

As an additional argument to this theological reasoning, Eusebius adds: <<Are you forgetting the precept by which God forbids to make images neither of beings in heaven nor of anything on earth? Have you ever heard such a thing in the Church yourself or indirectly through others? Have not these images been persecuted throughout the world and banished from the Church, and is it not well known that we are the only ones to whom this is illicit? ... I follow Paul who taught us all that we should not devote ourselves to carnal things>> [23] - And in passing, Eusebius mentions that he confiscated some supposed pictorial representations of Christ and St. Paul, which a woman possessed, in order to avoid accusing Christians of idolatry.

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[23] PL 20, 1545

“It is true," continues Eusebius, "that some heretical sects possess and venerate images of the founders of the sect". It is known that there are those who worship a portrait of Simon Magus, and Eusebius himself recalls having seen an image of Mani in a ceremony of his followers. “On the contrary," he says, "Christians give spiritual worship to their divine Savior, after purifying their hearts; and those who wish to see images have the divine Logos as the best of painters".

To what degree these testimonies of the canon of Elvira and the Letter of the Bishop of Caesarea represent the official position of the Church in the first decades of the fourth century, we cannot be sure. But it can be assumed that, still in that first half of the century, the attitude of church leaders was rather resistant, although the iconophile tendency, begun in the III century, was undoubtedly still spreading.

6. Still at the end of that century there is the case of St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis of Cyprus (d. 403), who, visiting Palestine and entering the church of a village (Anablata), irritated by a curtain that, according to the Christians, represented Christ or a saint ("non enim satis memini cuius imago fuerit", says the Latin text), snatched and tore it. And because the Christians of that town complained that he had left them without a curtain, St. Epiphanius sent another one to the priest of that community, recommending him "in ecclesia Christi istiusmodi vela, quae contra religionem nostram veniunt, non appendi".[24]

This episode is known to us from a letter of St. Epiphanius himself to Bishop John of Jerusalem, published in a Latin translation by St. Jerome [25] , but of which a Greek text is also preserved.

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[24] PL 22, 526

[25] See an extract from this Letter of St. Epiphanius of Cyprus to John of Jerusalem according to the text of St. Jerome. Translated by The Hon. W. H. Fremantle, M.A., Canon of Canterbury Cathedral and Fellow and Tutor of Balliol College, 1893 Oxford: “ I went in to pray, and found there a curtain hanging on the doors of the said church, dyed and embroidered.(1) It bore an image either of Christ or of one of the saints; I do not rightly remember whose the image was. Seeing this, and being loth that an image of a man should be hung up in Christ's church contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures, I tore it asunder and advised the custodians of the place to use it as a winding sheet for some poor person. They, however, murmured, and said that if I made up my mind to tear it, it was only fair that I should give them another curtain in its place. As soon as I heard this, I promised that I would give one, and said that I would send it at once”. (I had to use an outdated translation due to not being able to access a modern translation of the letter 51 of Jerome; the original Spanish uses a translation by Ruiz Bueno 1962, BAC)

7. It can be said that, for a century, what we have just summarized in the preceding pages constitutes the general opinion of the specialists of Christian history and archaeology. [26] -

The images were entering the Church "from the bottom up", in a gradual process of "paganization" or "Hellenization" of Christianity. The new converts, especially from the fourth century onwards, could not be satisfied with hearing the word of God as it was found in the Scriptures, and with a worship "in spiritu et veritate", but they also wished to see and touch that which they worshiped. Theologians and Church hierarchs found it difficult to accept these new customs, and did not do so until quite late in the fourth century.[27]

Once this thesis was accepted, another one was also assumed, in relation to the origin of the iconoclastic crisis. Almost all these researchers, but above all Elliger and Kitzinger, came to the conclusion that aniconism was not an exclusive tendency of the first three centuries, but that, in spite of the birth and continuous expansion of icons and even of their cult, the aniconic current was maintained, even if limited to certain sectors, in the course of the following centuries. [28]

Thus, the hostility to images that erupted in the iconoclastic crisis of the eighth century should be interpreted in the light of a process endogenous to Christianity itself.

This historical vision of the problem of images, which, although sufficiently well known to any historian of art and theology, we have preferred to present in some detail as a frame of reference to which we can refer the reader, was recently called into question in a very well documented study that deservedly found a long echo in specialized sectors.

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[26] E. VON DOBSCHUTZ, Christusbilder, Leipzig 1899; H. KocH *Die altchristliche Bilderfrage nach den literarischen Quellen* (FRLANT, 10), Göttingen 1917;,H. LECLERCQ Images, en DACL, t. V II, 180-302; W. E LLIGER, *Die Stellung der alfen Christen zu den Bildern in den ersten vier Jahrhwulerten* (Studien über christlichen Denkmiiler, XX), Leipzig 1930, 1-98; Th. KLAUSER, *Gesammelte Arbeiten zur Liturgiegeschichte, Kirchengeschichte und christlichen Archäologie*: Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum 3 (1974); G. B. LADNER, *The Concept of the lmages in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine lconoclastic Controversy*: Dumbarton Oaks Papers 7 (1 953) 3-34; E. KITZINGER, *The Cult of Images in the age before Iconoclasm*: Dumbarton Oaks Papers 8 (19541 83- 150; J. D. BRECKENRIDGE, *The Reception of Art into the Early Church*, en *Überlegungen zum Ursprung der frühchristlichen Bildkunst* (IX Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana), Roma 1975, 29-38.

[27] PAUL J. ALEXANDER, The Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople, Oxford 1958,p. 215.

[28] E. KITZINGER; The Cult of Images ... , p. 129: «Both · opposition and defense were aroused long before the issue was joined in the reign of Leo 111.» PETER BROWN, A Dark-Age crisis: aspects of the Iconodastic Controversy: The English Historical Review 88 (1973) 2: «It was a crisis within Byzantine Christianity itself.»

II. A CRITICAL REVISION

It is not easy to summarize this documented study by Professor M. Charles Murray, a bold plea of 42 tight pages, full of notes and references, with which she tried in 1977 to demolish the traditional thesis that we have just exposed. We attempt to summarize her main arguments.

l. Since the thesis of the primitive aniconism of the first Christian art is substantially supported by the fact that the first Fathers granted absolute validity to the Second Commandment of the Decalogue prohibiting images, the thesis would be weakened if it were proven that such an interpretation is not legitimate.

However, a rigorous analysis of the theological thought of the writers of the first three centuries leads one to think that they did not take seriously such a prohibition of the Mosaic Law. Until the middle of the second century there seems to have been no theological analysis of the significance and validity of the Old Law for the life of the Church. The study of some primitive texts suggests that the Law was little accredited; St. Justin does not allude to it when he speaks of the virtues. Clement Alexandrinus interprets it only symbolically. Other Fathers make use of the Old Testament in an inconsistent manner. Everything leads us to think that the allusions of the first ecclesiastical writers to the Second Commandment cannot be interpreted as if they were intended to give it strict validity in the Christian community.

It is not even certain that the Second Commandment was interpreted by the Jews themselves with the rigidity that the scholars in favor of the traditional thesis pretend to give it. In the Jewish cemeteries of the same period appear symbolic and figurative representations. The sarcophagus of an Israelite of profession "zoógraphos", that is to say, "painter of living beings" is conserved. The paintings discovered in the synagogue of Dura Europos show that not even the human figure was avoided.

It is inadmissible, therefore, that the doctrinal and cultural background of the first Christian art was a Judaizing environment hostile to figuration, when the Israelites themselves had abandoned a rigorous interpretation of the Mosaic prohibition, aimed only at avoiding idolatry.

2. As for the texts of the Fathers adduced in favor of the traditional aniconic thesis, it should be noted first of all that the number of texts adduced is very small in comparison with the weight attributed to them. They are presented in chronological order in order to arbitrarily emphasize their ideological linkage. Texts are omitted that could admit of a contrary interpretation. A notable authority is attributed to writers of deviant doctrine such as Tertullian, and on the other hand, texts of the great Cappadocians of the fourth century are minimized.

A Christian community is conceived as strongly divided between hierarchs and the lay masses, as if the latter were a mass sensitive to superstitions and pressures of contemporary animism, and not a community closely linked to leaders in whose election it intervened directly.

Some of the most frequently cited texts do not refer "in recto" to the use of images, but rather to the making of idols [29], or imply a certain Neoplatonic depreciation of symbols rather than an explicit rejection of their use [30]- Other texts, .more apparently anti-iconic, may receive a less hostile interpretation if we look at their context, in which the censure goes in a different direction [31], or refer to a particular sector of Christians [32]-.

3. The three major pieces in favor of the traditional thesis are the canon of Elvira, the letter of Eusebius to Constantius and the iconoclastic episode of St. Epiphanius.

The authority of the canon of Elvira in favor of the aniconic thesis must be devalued because it is a local synod, celebrated in special circumstances (still in the era of persecutions); perhaps it refers only to the representation of the figure of Christ; and it may be that what is to be avoided is a mural art in places where an irruption of imperial police could cause an execrable profanation. On the other hand, there is some evidence to the contrary, such as the mural paintings of the Christian baptistery of Dura Europos.

4. As for the famous letter of Eusebius to Constantius, there are doubts about its authenticity. On the other hand, the references to images of Christ in the Vita Constantini of Eusebius himself are positive (so much so that Klauser felt obliged to judge these passages to be interpolated). The invocation of Mosaic prohibitions runs contrary to Eusebius' theology of history, for whom the entire Old Testament reached its consummation in the Incarnation.

One should not overvalue an uncertain text by an author who, already in his time, was considered to be semi-Arian. "The Letter appears to be of such an uncertain nature, in so many areas that it cannot be used as clear proof of an attitude of hostility to art on the part of Eusebius, and through him, of the whole Church of the fourth century. And since its origin is completely obscure, and its content has no coherence with what we know of the conceptions (of the theology of history) of Eusebius himself, even its authenticity is doubtful. If, in spite of everything, it were authentic, the most that can be said is that it refers specifically to an icon of Christ ... "[33]-

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[29] TERTULIAN, De idol., 4, 1.

[30] CLEMENT Al., Strom., 6, 16, 147.

[31] TERTULIAN, De pudic., 7, X, 12; CLEMENTE, Paedag., 3, 12, 1;ASTERIUS OF AMASEA, Homily I on the rich man and the homeless Lazarus (PG 40, 167).

[32] S. AUGUSTINE, De moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae, 1, 34.

[33] M. CHARLES MURRAY, Art and the Early Church: JTS 28 (1977) 336.

If, as it seems, Eusebius means that "there were no such examples of icons in the Church", such an argument is false, for in the same Lateran Basilica the Emperor had just erected the famous "fastigium" which, according to the Líber Pontificalis, was surmounted by an Argentic statue of Christ, five feet high, with the Apostles and angels.

5. As for the episode of St. Epiphanius, if we stick to the Greek text of the saint's letter to John of Jerusalem, as preserved in a florilegium of iconoclastic texts of the Council of 815, collected by Nicephorus of Constantinople, what follows is that Epiphanius tore not a curtain in which he saw a representation of Christ, but an idolatrous painting in which some simple spectators pretended to see the image of Christ or of a saint.

The protest of the Christians of that village was directed at the fact that the saint had left them without a curtain and had not taken care to replace it with another. On the other hand, the Greek text omits everything that the Letter of Epiphanius, in the Latin version of St. Jerome, conveys as a biblical argument invoked by St. Epiphanius.

6. In conclusion, the author says: "It seems reasonable to conclude that there are not sufficient reasons to maintain that the Fathers of the primitive Church were hostile to art" [34]- There never existed, on this point, the pretended dichotomy between the authoritative texts and Christian practice.

What was wanted to be avoided was the danger of idolatry, and the figurative art that was practiced did not induce it. It is untenable that the hierarchy did not agree with an art (that of the catacombs and sarcophagi) that was practiced, at the end of the second century, "in facie Ecclesiae".

Consequently, it is also untenable that there was a genetic link between the aniconism of the first three centuries and the outbreak of iconoclasm in the eighth century. At the beginning of early Christian art, it was a question of the simple use of images; in the 8th century, it was a question of legitimizing the cult of images.

The methodological error of the scholars of the last eighty years has been in wanting to make the history of the early Church only on the basis of literary texts, without giving due relevance to the material documents, relegating them to the study of archaeologists.

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[34] a.c., p. 342.

III. CRITIQUE OF A CRITIQUE

Mary Charles Murray's (Ch. M.) study must have been considered in 1977 by many scholars as a powerful blow against a theory considered "in posessione" in the course of the last hundred years. Subsequent essays involving some relation to the art of the first centuries could not but take it into account.

The author of the essay we now criticize, when invited to participate in the International Colloquium of the Collège de France, in October 1986, commemorating the twelfth centenary of Nicaea II, informs us that the paper she was entrusted with had this formulation: <<To put an end once and for all to the pretended iconophobia of the first Christian centuries." And already from the very prologue of her dissertation, Ch. M. has the honesty to confess: <<It would certainly be gratifying if we could reach a decisive conclusion once and for all, but recent research shows us that we have not yet finished with this problem."

And indeed, there are several points on which Ch. M.'s argumentation seems to weaken. To begin with, the audacity of a review and analysis is strange. They study the question each from their own *(** Own what? There seems to be a graphic error in the original Spanish at this point and that makes its reading a matter of speculation, so I have to leave it untranslated**)* example of the phenomenon by which an assertion succeeds in converting into established truth what was initially only the subject of a specialist opinion. "[35]

The authors who accepted the prevailing thesis in recent decades have not limited themselves to repeating it as if it were a thesis that did not need critical revision that begins with the observation that the traditional thesis <<is a *(**There seems to be another graphic error in the original Spanish at this point that makes its reading a matter of speculation, so I have to leave it untranslated**)* ; many of them contribute new clues, analyze the texts in the light of new inquiries, do first-hand work, and above all qualify their formulations. For example, W. Elliger, one of the most cited by the English historian, in speaking of the Apologists, points out that he does not find any expression which, referring to the image of Christ concretely, supposes a clear rejection nor a manifest approval. She nuances the thought of the great Cappadocian Fathers and shows how a current of opinion favorable to the use of images is progressively being created. Later works, such as those of Kitzinger, Ladner and Paul Alexander, are far from being reduced to a "repeated affirmation of a thesis accepted without adequate analysis".

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[35] a.c., p. 303.

** The first graphical error is that at the end of a line of the paragraph you see the following (es-) the hyphen indicates that the word should be continued on the next line but this is not the case. What follows is: "example of the phenomenon..."

**The second graphic error consists of using the verb "to be" in the third person singular followed by an indeterminate masculine singular article and continues with a word that does not exist in Spanish and may be a typo, but I do not wish to speculate and translate through guessing according to my criteria.

On the other hand, it is somewhat strange that the traditional thesis is to be demolished without the discovery of new facts. Excluding some new, but debatable, data against the authenticity of certain texts that supported the traditional thesis, what now pretends to establish a new vision of the problem is a reinterpretation that wants to justify itself with a new methodology.

Let us also say, from the outset, that we do not agree with a formulation of the subject that, in this researcher, is common to many authors she cites. The expression "hostility to art" seems to us to be totally inappropriate and runs the risk of facilitating a false approach to the question. It should not be said that the traditional thesis defends the "hostility to art" in the first Christian centuries, but the " hostility to images", giving to this term a meaning that should be clarified from the beginning.

All visual art, and not only Christian art, can be abstract or ornamental, figurative and iconic. And these three modalities can occur progressively, as seems to have been the case with Christian art. The traditional thesis, with more or less exact formulations by scholars, holds that Paleochristian art gradually went from being an ornamental and symbolic art to a figurative and narrative art, until it ended up in a properly iconic art: in which the artist seems to invite the contemplator to concentrate his attention on the figure or portrait of a person.

If this distinction in the visual language is kept in mind, it is easier to admit, with the data we possess, the aniconism of the first three centuries and to recognize that the discussed "hostility to art" is reduced to a repugnance to the use of the "icons", and icons only began to spread in the second half of the fourth century.

We will now attempt to examine each of the arguments put forward by the English historian.

l. First of all, the effort to devalue the force and credit that the Mosaic Law must have had in the first ecclesiastical leaders, besides being supported by unconvincing arguments, takes the debate to the terrain of literary, doctrinal and explicit texts, in which both the traditional thesis and her thesis lack a sufficient number of conclusive proofs. Only a confirmation of a proven thesis "aliunde" can be derived from the texts. The most important proof of the Christian aniconism of the first centuries is the very absence of images; and the logic with which a priori the coherence between such absence and the Judaic cultural tradition is induced .[36]

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[36] «From the Synagogue the Early Church inherited its hostility to religious art, which both identified with paganism.» PAUL J. ALEXANDER, The Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople, Oxford 1958, p. 214

We believe that both Charles Murray and some of those affiliated with the traditional thesis attribute excessive relevance to dogmatic and doctrinal texts, as if art had to respond immediately to the ideology of intellectual and religious leaders. Art is not a matter of rational formulations, but of attitudes of sensibility. Sensibility is ambiguous and imprecise by nature. It is formed gradually through the slow sedimentation of ideas and doctrines; and, once formed, it remains alive for a long time, even when the ideas that generated it have been replaced by others. There may have been an art of Arian or Monophysite inspiration even where the followers of Arius or Eutyches have disappeared. It is natural and logical that, in the first centuries, there was an austerely aniconic art corresponding to a sensibility of extensive and continued Judaic inspiration.

2. Only as an argument of convergence with the lack of iconic material evidence in the first three centuries and with the logic of a sensibility of Judaic heritage, some texts of the ecclesiastical writers of the period have force, not so much for what they say as for the silence they show with respect to a contemporary iconic art. We think that the argument "ex silentio" to which T. Klauser resorts retains all its force [37].

And the fact that when the first Christian art appears, at least according to the data that archaeology has left us, it is only constituted by symbols and not by figures, and then by figures and not by images, seems to us to be quite illuminated by the texts of Clement of Alexandria recalling the Second Precept of the Decalogue.

Ch. M. argues that, before the fourth century and the Council of Elvira, we cannot find any explicit condemnation of the use of images. This statement does not seem absolutely true if we stick to the immediate meaning of some text of Clement Alexandrinus (which Ch.M. omits) and which expressly says: <<We Christians are forbidden to exercise a manifestly deceptive art; for the Prophet says: You shall not make any imitation of what exists above in heaven and below on earth>> [38.]

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[37] «Wichtig ist dass Klemens an dieser Stelle unter den für den Christen möglichen Siegelbildem keine menschlichen Figuren nennt; insbesondere hat er weder das Motiv des 'Guten Hirten' noch das der 'Orans' angeführt. Diesmal ist wieder das argumentum e silentio zwingend.» Die Äusserungen der alten Kirche zur Kunst. En Gesammelte Arbeiten zur Liturgiegeschichte, Kirchengeschichte und christlichen Archäologie: Jahrb.f.Antike u. Christ. 3 (1974) p. 330.

[38] Cohort. ad gentes, IV; PG 8, 162

And in referring to this deceptive art (apatelón), a scholar of Hellenistic culture could not help but think of the fallacy (apaté) of all artistic mimesis [39] - On the other hand, there is nothing strange about this relative absence of condemnatory texts, since it is the logical correspondence to an absence of iconic art.

From the first years of the third century we only have news of some symbolic signs in the ring-seals cited by Clement Alexandrinus (the dove, the fish) and the symbolic figure of the Good Shepherd on the chalices referred to by Tertullian. Even the first figures that appear painted on the oldest cemetery walls, in the middle of the third century (the Good Shepherd, the Orante, Jonah, etc.) are symbolic figures. As for the visual arts, the equally symbolic scenes shown on the oldest Christian sarcophagi (from 250 onwards) [40], with idyllic landscapes, shepherds and sheep, and schematic scenes of philosophical teaching, constitute a first figurative step, of ancient evocations, in which even the pagans could feel themselves expressed.

The only exception that can be adduced in favor of a Christian figurative art of the first half of the third century is that of Dura Europos. And, given its exceptionality, the reason adduced by Klauser that explains it by its situation on the frontier of Christianity is not without weights [41] .

3. Let us turn to the three major pieces of evidence supporting the traditional thesis.

The strength of the canon of Elvira, notwithstanding Ch. M.'s arguments to weaken it, remains substantially unchanged. Its importance cannot be minimized because it is a local synod, since its canons are honorably cited in the Council of Sardica (343) and in that of Soissons (744), and by medieval writers. For those who accept the convergence between the three arguments to which we have referred - the logical prevention against images in a religion born in the Israelite environment, the absence of material evidence of a properly iconic art and the texts of the Fathers - the condemnatory canon of Elvira is coherently integrated in a historical moment in which images begin to penetrate the churches at the rhythm in which a sensibility of Incarnation is being created.

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[39] That deception (apaté), to which Clement refers in a context in which he quotes Praxiteles, Lysippus and Apelles, could well be, in the mind of this Alexandrian rhetorician, the " sweet deception of poetry" and art (apaté) to which the sophist Gorgias, and later Theophrastus, and Quintilian and other rhetoricians, had already referred in their day. <<Falsa, non etiam fallens", St. Augustine called poetry (PL 32, 898); <<for poets by obligation lie and by rule pretend", Gracián will say in the Criticón. And the condition of art and poetry will be, since the Romantic Aesthetics, to be <<splendide mendax" (Baumgarten).

[40] F. GERKE, Die christlichen Sarkophage der vorkonstantinischen Zeit, Berlín 1940, 323 p.

[41] a.c., p. 336: <<Man lebt hier sozusagen am Rande der Christenheit. Was híer geschieht, ist für die übrige Kirche nicht kennzeichnend. War die Gemeinde von Dura überhaupt orthodox?»

The notorious canon would be nothing more than the expression of the warning that some writers would feel obliged to launch. It is up to the hierarchs (the history of twenty centuries is quite instructive in this regard) to exercise this function of restraint in the face of innovations which, at first sight, seem to violate the holy traditions; but which, in the end, end up being accepted by leaders who are responsible for “not quenching the Spirit."

4. The importance that the Letter of Eusebius to Constantius has for the traditional thesis has been relativized by the criticism of Ch. M. in questioning its authenticity. Specialized historians such as K. Holl [42], G. Florovsky [43] and, more recently, Stephen Gero in a rigorous study in which he analyzes the vocabulary, the language and the style of the Letter in comparison with the other recognized works of the historian of Caesarea. Although Gero is extremely reserved in limiting himself to the conclusion that the Letter must certainly be, if not by Eusebius himself, at least by an author of the same doctrinal circle, the arguments seem to us so convincing as to induce certainty [44]- Ch. Murray herself is compelled to put an end to her doubts, and in her 1986 paper declares: "Son analyse nous conduit a accepter la lettre comme authentique" 45

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[42] K. HOLL, Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte, Darmstadt, 1964, II, p. 387, footnote 1: <<An der Echtheit des Briefes hat nur Befangenheit zweifeln konnen. Sprache, Standpunkt, Auffassung stimmen ganz mit dem unangefochtenen Eusebius überein. Ware das Schreiben in einem späteren Jahrhundert gefälscht, so müsste die dogmatische Begründung scharfer gefasst sein.»

[43] G. FLOROVSKY, Origen, Eusebius and the iconoclastic Controversy: Church History 19 (1950) 84.

[44] S. GERO, The true Image of Christ: Eusebius' Letter to Constantia reconsidered:
JTS 32 (1981) 460-470.

[45] Le problème de l'iconophobie et les premiers siècles chrétiens, en E. BOESPFLUGN. LOSSKY (ed.), Nicée II. 787-1987. Douze siècles d'images religieuses, París 1987,
p. 45.

Once its authenticity is recognized, the weight of the Letter can be undermined by the analysis of its content, as Ch. M. tries to demonstrate that Eusebius did not adhere rigorously to the truth or had little knowledge of contemporary history, since in the Lateran Basilica the famous “fastigium" with the impressive effigy of Christ and the Apostles had been built. But today it seems absolutely proven that such a monument, now disappeared, had to be much later. This is the opinion of Stephen Gero in the aforementioned study [46] and, more recently, of Robert Grigg, who in analyzing the aniconic cult of the period of Constantine, affirms that the "fastigium" could not have been contemporary with that Emperor, finally deducing that in the fourth century there was a strong official iconophobic stream that could be located in the culturally elitist court environment of the imperial court, a stream that would be reflected in the canon of Elvira. [47]

Charles Murray, who in 1986 amends her position of 1977 and accepts the new view of the problem suggested by R. Grigg, now sees more convincingly the relationship that the iconophobic attitude of Eusebius can and must have with his semi-Arian thought and with a stream that in certain milieus of the fourth century, more austere and spiritualistic, pushed towards a radical differentiation of specifically religious temper at the time when the cultural homogeneity of the officially Christian empire threatened to dilute the purest essence of Christianity: "The two iconophobic texts, the canon of Elvira and the Letter of Eusebius to Constantius, seem to belong to a more rigid intellectual tradition within the Church and, plausibly, to a more elitist tradition in connection with imperial circles." Thus, the problem would now become concrete not in whether the Church of the first centuries was iconodule or iconophobic, but in determining the limits within which this iconophobia was enclosed. "The mainstream of Church practice continued to be iconic and did not regard art as heretical; this fact is clearly attested by the ever-increasing richness of the artistic tradition and its full flowering under Justinian. Aniconism may have been linked or may have continued to be linked in the popular and orthodox spirit with Arianism and thus with heresy.” [48]

This new approach to the question does not seem convincing to us. The linking of Eusebius to Arian ideas, an argument used by the iconodule theologians of the eighth century in their controversy with the iconoclasts, may have had force in that century to undermine the authority of his doctrine, but today it does not serve to diminish the validity of his testimonies referring to the fourth century. His ideological proximity to Arianism would make him rather inclined to accept the images, by placing the Logos in inferiority and separated from the Divinity.

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[46] a.c., p. 465: <<Unfortunately, this argument, though prima facie impressive, hinges upon the uncritical acceptance of the testimony of a late, and not uniformly reliable source, the Líber Pontificalis. Why not accept also the Byzantine iconophile legends about Constantine's patronage of sacred art? A recent detailed study of the descriptions of the Fastigium demonstrates that it reflects an iconographical scheme which is later than the early fourth century.»

[47] R. GRIGG, Constantine the Great and the Cult without Images: Viator 8 (1977) 1-32.

[48] a.c., p. 48.

The anti-iconic position of Eusebius has nothing to do with his alleged Arianism, has written Campenhausen [49]- And W. Elliger: "Precisely what underlies his opinion against the images is what most distances him from Arianism" [50]- Jacques Fontaine, in a study on early Christian sculpture in Spain [51] , called attention to the relationship that may exist between the representation of a youthful and bearded Jesus (the so-called Hellenistic type) with the Arian sensibility, while the representations of a mature, bearded and stately Jesus (the Syrian type) would correspond to a milieu more imbued by a Monophysite theology.

As several authors have already noticed, Eusebius' theological resistance to images must be related less to Arianism than to Origenism. His fundamental idea that the flesh of Christ should not hold our attention is explicit in Origen. One of the basic tendencies of Origenism led to the devaluation of everything corporeal and sensible, to the depreciation of the historical past and of temporal events that are only shady images of the permanent, essential and eternal [52] - The body of Jesus, after his Resurrection, was assumed by the Divinity and can no longer be distinguished from it [53] - From this Christology logically derives a disinterest in the historical figure of Christ and in his sensible image.

5. As for the episode of St. Epiphanius, no one doubts its authenticity. The arguments of Karl Holl in 1916, in spite of the contrary opinion of Ostrogovsky in 1929, retained their force in the opinion of F. Dolger (in his review of Ostrogovsky's work); and so do those who, like Gero, have today studied the matter anew. [54]

Once its authenticity is accepted, it only remains to give this episode its true dimension. As we have observed with regard to the canon of Elvira, it seems certain that, at the beginning of the fourth century, the first attempts at iconic representations of Christ and the saints appeared. In the second half of that century this custom began to become generalized. This is more than a hypothesis, since we have data on contemporary icons in the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers and in those of St. Epiphanius himself, who gives us such iconographic details on portraits of Christ, St. Peter and St. Paul that there can be no doubt that this iconographic diffusion was taking place in spite of his own lamentations[55] .

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[49] H. FREI HERR VON CAMPENHAUSEN, Die Bilderfrage als theologisches Problem der alten Kirche: ZThK 49 (1952) 39.

[50] a.c., p. 52-53.

[51] Iconographie et spiritualité dans la sculpture chrétienne d'Espagne du IV au VII siècle: Revue d'Histoire de la Spiritualité 50 (1974) 292-293.

[52] G. FLOROVSKY, Origen, Eusebius, and the iconoclastic Controversy: Church History 19 (1950) 87.

[53] ORÍGENES, In Jo., XXXII, 17; Contra Celsum, 11, 9.

[54] STEPHEN GERO, Byzantine /iconoclasm during the Reign of Constantine V with particular attention to the Oriental Sources (Corpus Script. Chr. Or:), Louvain 1977, p. 81

[55] See the fragments 24 y 26 en K. HOLL, Gesammelte Aufsätze, Darmstadt 1964, Il, p. 361-362

Concerning Charles Murray's claim to marginalize the Latin account of St. Jerome and to stick to the Greek text in order to interpret that the famous curtain of Anablata was not an image of Christ, but an idol which some unwary people pretended to identify with a Christian representation, it seems to us unreasonable to completely disregard the translation of St. Jerome, almost contemporary, and the work of a friend and confidant of St. Epiphanius.[56]

Let us add, as Maraval says, that "the translation of St. Jerome certainly seems to indicate the existence, at the end of the fourth century, of a stream that would like to apply to the Christian images the prohibition of the Decalogue, and this stream has no qualms in making use of the patronage of the holy bishop Epiphanius."

On the other hand, it is not easy to understand the effort to reinterpret the episode of St. Epiphanius at Anablata in a sense that is not very hostile to images when one admits the authenticity of the other texts of the same bishop (the preserved fragments of his Treatise, of his Testament and of his Letter to Theodosius), which are also radically hostile.

6. One of the positions most vehemently maintained by Charles Murray is her refusal to see in aniconism a stream endogenous to Christianity, linking the iconoclastic crisis with the first Christian aniconism. And yet this is still a rather general interpretation. P. Brown thinks that "Almost all specialists have come to consider Iconoclasm as a movement endogenous to Christianity ``[58] - Kitzinger thinks the same, recalling a Monophysite stream of the 5th century and an iconophobic current in Armenia in the 6th century [59].

Indeed, one of the arguments in favor of the existence of this stream within the Church itself is the case of Armenia, where there were enemies of images in the 6th century, as can be seen from the apology that an obscure author of that time has to write, which seems to be inspired by Byzantine authors, and which leads Sirarple der Nersesian to the conclusion that «ces écrits indiquent que la question de la légitimité des images avait préoccupé les écrivains byzantins avant la période iconoclaste» [60]

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56 PIERRE MARAVAL, Epiphane, «docteur des lconoclastes» , en Nicée ll. 787-1987. Douze siècles d'images religieuses, p. 54

57 MANSI XIII, 292 D, 293 D, 277 D, 336 E; PITRA, Spicil. Solesm., l , 380, 20ff.; IV, 292ff.; K. HoLL, o.c., JI, 356-368

58 A Dark-Age crisis: aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy: The English History. Review 88 (1973) 2.

59 O.c., p. 129.

60 Une apologie des images du septième siècle: Byzantion 17 (1944-45) 58-87 (p. 83).

Archbishop Hypatius of Ephesus (531-538), who was forced to appease the scruples of one of his suffragans by allowing paintings and sculptures in his churches, and perhaps to worship them, also belongs to the 6th century. Hypatius considers that, for him and for the cultured faithful, the sacred Word may suffice, but out of "philanthropy" with the weak masses, imagery may be legitimized for its "anagogical" function. [61] -

When one considers that the edict of the Isaurian found support and, it seems, inspiration in some Byzantine bishops, one of whom, Anastasius, immediately succeeded the faithful Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople, and that in the iconoclastic council of Hiereia (753), 338 bishops adhered to the eight anathemas against the iconodules, it is not improbable to accept that a stream hostile to the images had been maintained, more or less subway, during the three previous centuries. [62]

In the West, during these centuries, there were also some outbreaks of iconoclasm similar to that of Saint Epiphanius, as was the case of Serenus, bishop of Marseilles, to whom Saint Gregory the Great had to remind the decorative, didactic and reminder function of the images [63] - Aniconism characterized the art of some Germanic peoples recently Christianized and, later, that of the Carolingian Empire. As late as the eighth century, the Carolingian Books and the Council of Frankfurt (794) with its 300 bishops expressed a position clearly hostile to the cult of images and unfavorable to their use.[64]

With reason, some have underlined this sort of "synchronization" between the iconoclastic challenge of the Byzantine Empire and the aniconic position of the Carolingian Empire, to point towards permanent streams of religious and aesthetic sensibility. [65]

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[61] P. ALEXANDER, The Patriarch Nikephoros ... , p. 216; NORMAN H. BAYNES, The Icon before Iconoclasm: HTR 44 (1951) 94-106.

[62] P. ALEXANDER, o.c., p. 217: «The support which Leo received from the Byzantine clergy ís explicable only in terms of the old tradition within the Christian Church which opposed the icons.»

[63] GREGORIO MAGNO: Lib. XI, Epist. XIII; PL 77, 1128.

[64] PETER BROWN, a.c., p. 4.

[65] P. BROWN, a.c., p. 5-9; J. PLAZAOLA, El arte sacro actual (BAC), Madrid 1965, p. 389-426

IV. SUMMING UP

After the analysis we have just developed, it only remains for us to summarize our position by summarizing it in the following points:

l. We know of no pieces of Christian art prior to the third century. Clement Alexandrinus' references to a certain glyptic (rings) with exclusively symbolic figures (the dove, the fish), as well as his invocation of the Second Commandment [66], lead us to think that there were no figurative representations at least until far into the third century.

This lack is logical with the influence that the Jewish culture had to exert on the first Christian communities and in the first education of their sensibility. Within this logic it also makes sense that in the ecclesiastical writers of that time there are no references to Christian art:

2. Human figuration does not appear until the third century. The oldest paintings in the catacombs of Domitilla, Callixtus (crypt of Lucina), etc., with ornamental sets conformed to the Roman style of the period (first third of the third century), with small symbolic and schematic figures: Daniel, Jonah, the Good Shepherd, the Orans ... and suggest the idea of salvation and the survival of the soul. The oldest sarcophagi, from the time of Decius (c. 250) [67], with vague representations of philosophers, inspire the idea of a saving doctrine. Symbolic figures - the Good Shepherd, the Orans? -, pastoral scenes evoking Paradise, the salvific Sacraments (the Water of Life and the Eucharistic Supper): all of them focused attention on the mission of Christ rather than on his person. [68]

3. At the beginning of the fourth century the symbolic gave way to the narrative, and while the salvific symbolism of the III century adopted preferably OT events [69], now the focus is on the earthly life of Christ and his miracles [70]- The figure of Jesus gradually supplanted the Shepherd-savior and the Philosopher.

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[66] CLEMENT, Paedag., 1, 111, c. XI; PG 8, 633. V. también Th. KLAUSER, Studien zur Entstehungsgéschichte der christlichen Kunst: JAC (1958) 21c23.
[67] F. GERKE, o.c., p. 317.
[68] J. KOLLWITZ, Das Christusbild des dritten jahrhunderts, Münster 1953, p. 36.
[69] Th. Klauser has inventoried the number of Old Testament figures, far superior to those of the New Testament, in the pre-Constantinian sepulchral monuments.. Studien .. . , p. 133ss
[70] F. GERKE, o.c., p. 322.

During these decades, representational art must have been tolerated by Church leaders, rather than permitted and encouraged, among other reasons because such figures offered no danger of idolatry, and it was doubtful whether they violated the Mosaic Law. [71]

4. Figurative art, and later iconic art, were born from a progressive experience of Christianity and its essential dogma: the Incarnation of the Word. The explanation of the origin of the images as a paganization or Hellenization of the Christian culture through lay converts seems to us an explanation that privileges in excess the factors of acculturation that are always real, but that marginalizes the fundamental factor of Christianity: Religion of Incarnation and its essential nucleus that is the faith in a God born of woman. In contrast to the exclusively transcendent sensibility of Jewish religiosity, Christianity demands faith in the salvific value of historical events. For the believer, God himself becomes history, a carnal reality with a historical and temporal aspect, which will be demanding a material and sensible expression.

As long as Christian leaders feel pressured by Judaism or Neoplatonism (contemptuous of everything material and corporeal), they will prefer to evoke those facts by means of symbols. But they will soon feel the "Christian" need to bring into play the imagination to represent those fundamental events in the sensitive forms of art and liturgy.

And the same Apologist Fathers who, on the one hand, reminded the faithful of the prohibition of the Second Commandment, opened the way to a new, authentically Christian sensitivity by preaching that "from the beginning, the Word had announced that God would be contemplated by men, that He would live and converse with them on earth, that He would be present to the creature He had fashioned in order to 'save it and let Himself be apprehended by it." [72]

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[71] It cannot be said that the ecclesiastical authority was in favor of the creation of images; but neither can it be said that the opposition was so clear and determined that it prevented the development of a Christian art that, from being merely catechetical and reminder, was going to become an iconic art. It is more likely that the Hierarchy was realizing that a practice that seemed to be imposed on it from the bottom up responded effectively to the very nature of Christianity. So, rather than a "capitulation" of the hierarchy (Th. Klauser, Gesammelte Arbeiten, 1974, p. 335), we should speak of a gradual awareness of the ecclesiastical leaders, to which the behavior of the lay sector contributed.

[72] IRENAEUS, Adv. haer., 4, 20, 4-5; PG 7, 1036.

5. The first justification that the Hierarchs found for the use of images was their capacity for anamnesis and their catechetical and pedagogical functionality. Already in the second half of the IV century, St. Gregory of Nyssa called the image "grafé sioposa "[73] : "Silent Scripture." And the great St. Basil said that "what the word presents to the ear, mute painting shows by imitation". Two centuries later, this would become an official doctrine: Pope St. Gregory the Great, admonishing Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles, told him that "praecipue gentibus pro lectione pictura est"; "it is one thing to adore the painting and another to learn, by means of painted history, what is to be adored." [74]

6. With the passage from figurative art to iconic art, a decisive step was taken in the history of art. And this process is evident in what refers to the icon-portrait of Christ.[75]

It is fascinating to study this process and to see how the figure of Christ, which in the first sarcophagi can be found symbolized in any of the Shepherds or Philosophers represented, is then placed, exclusively and uniquely, in the central axis of the sepulchral front; then it will become the Lord who confers the new Law, then the Imperator clad in a chlamys and carrying the cross as a scepter and, finally, the Master of the universe and Lord of history. [76]

7. The cult of images must have arisen in the East, with logical naturalness, before the cult received by the effigies of the Emperors [77], and probably began with the proskynesis before the symbol of the cross and the relics of the martyrs.

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[73] PG 46, 757.

[74] V. supra, footnote 63

[75] André Grabar has well observed why this move to the portrait of Christ (typological portrait) was such a momentous step : «Pour les chrétiens de l'antiquité tout portrait religieux posait un grand problème d'ordre moral, car plus que toute autre image, il rappelait les dangers de l'idolâtrie.» Les voies de la création en iconographie chrétienne, París 1979, p. 64.

[76] J. KOLLWITZ, Das Bild von Christus dem König in Kunst und Liturgie der christlichen Frühzeit : ThG1 (1947-1948) 95-117; JOSEF FINK, Die Anfiinge der Christusdarstellung: ThR 6 (1955) 241-252.On the formal influence exerted on this process of the icon of Christ by the models of the imperial imagery, see A. GRABAR, a.c., p. 42ss.

[77] D. SAVRAMIS, Der abergläubische Missbrauch der Bilder in Byzanz: Ostkirchliche Studien 9 (1960) 176: <<Die logische Folge war, dass wenigstens die gleiche Verehrung für Christus und sein Bild gefordert und eingeführt wurde. Die Bilder Christi und ihre einsetzende Verehrung steht in einer engen Verbindung mit der Verehrung die dem Kaiserbild gezollt wurde.»

In the East, the oldest surviving testimony of veneration of an image is that of the pagans before a sculpture of Christ and the woman suffering from hemorrhages in the Palestinian village of Paneas, recounted by Eusebius [78]; and in the West, the "picturarum adoratores," recalled by St. Augustine [79] ; both cases are cited as vituperable examples.

In the East, probably in the fifth century, the icon becomes an object of worship, with what this means for an Oriental [80]: not only an object to which external signs of veneration and respect are granted, but sacramental, an object considered efficacious by an intrinsic energy. In the first half of the fourth century there is talk of proskynesis before images in churches. Kitzinger has described the process of intensification of the cult of images in the following centuries [81], as well as the manifest tendency to cross the barrier between the image and the prototype and to accentuate their identification.

The enormous development of the oriental cult of images is not lacking a linkage to the animism of the masses. Some authors point to the magical and superstitious sense with which this cult was lived and practiced. Historically, it seems to be proven that the diffusion of the cult of icons was favored by the legends related to the icons “aquiropoietic" (not made by human hand"). [82]

8. In the eighth century it became necessary to justify that cult theologically. Here the same process must have occurred as in the first centuries: just as the mass of believers made and used images before the leaders became aware of their anamnestic and pedagogical value, so now the Eastern Christians spread their cult before the leaders elaborated their theology. This effort arose as a spontaneous need to defend the validity of the veneration of icons against the arguments of the iconomachus who were scandalized by the magical forms that this cult had taken in some popular sectors

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[78] Hist. Eccles., VII, 14; PG 20, 679

[79] De moribus Ecclesiae, 1, c. 34; PL 32, 1342

[80] A. GRADAR, Les voies de la création en iconographie chrétienne, París 1979, p. 75: “Les portes les plus anciens du Christ et de la Vierge que l’on puisse classer dans ce groupe ne sont pas antérieurs au V^{e} siècle: je pense en effet que c’est pendant le règne de Théodose II qu’ils commencèrent à apparaître ou du moins que leur usage s'élargit.”

[81] A.c., p. 90-128.

[82] SAVRAMIS, a.c., p. 186-88; E. KITZINGER, a.c., 113-119.

9. The causes of the iconoclastic movement are still not well clarified. Some historians some time ago underlined the economic and financial causes, and concretely the greed of Emperor Leo III for the immense wealth of the monks. Others have pointed to political causes. Recently, researchers are more inclined to theological causes, which are also evident. "It was an essentially Christological debate," wrote P. Alexander [83] - A debate "on the very essence of the sacred in Byzantine society," added P. Brown [84] - The problem is undoubtedly extremely complex. Perhaps it should be said that the quarrel had mainly financial and political causes in its first moment, with Emperor Leo III; among them, Kitzinger points out the possibility that the Emperor wanted to recover a lost prestige in a period in which the imperial effigies were no longer venerated and instead the exorbitant cult of icons proliferated. Then, the more strictly theological factors were felt under Constantine Copronymus (who had his vagaries of theologian and preacher) and especially in the second period of the Iconoclasm (814-842).

As for the ideological and cultural causes, and their possible connection with primitive aniconism, it is not possible to reduce the problem by simplifying it once again to a phenomenon of semitization in the face of the Hellenization of Christian religiosity. [85]

10. Summing up, finally, our position regarding Christian art of the first three centuries, aniconism, in the strict sense we have given to this term, must be admitted as evident. That the birth and diffusion of images in Christianity should be conceived as a "paganization" or "Hellenization" of the lay masses seems to us to be a mistake that leaves aside the most determining causal fact: the deepening of the mystery of the Incarnation in the life of the Christian communities. The cultural contagion of pagan Hellenism could have had a partial influence, especially in the abuses of certain sectors.

It does not seem to us so absolutely proven that the iconoclastic explosion of the 8th century is genetically related to the aniconism of the first centuries. The endogenous explanation remains, for us, for the time being a probable hypothesis.

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[83] The Patriarch Nicephoros of Constantinople, p. 217.

[84] A Dark-age crisis, p. 34.

[85] According to FLOROVSKY, ‘the main inspiration for iconoclastic thought was Hellenistic’, a.c., p. 96.