

Iconoclasm or Idolatry? Neither!



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September 26th, 2010*

Iconoclasm or Idolatry? Neither!

Iconoclasm. Literally, it means the smashing of icons - images. From the biblical standpoint, images would seem to be a problem. There is, after all, the Second Commandment: *"Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image."* The proscription against idolatry is one of the strongest features of Judaism and it carries over into Christianity and Islam. And rightly so. The basic and fundamental insight is that God is not to be confused with the things of this world. *"Thou shalt not make to thyself ... the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth."* Nature is not to be worshipped, only acknowledged as the cloak of the glory of God.

Idolatry. It belongs to the great Judeo-Christian and Islamic insight that it never goes away and has always to be contended against. The problem is greatly intensified for Christians. Why? Because of the Incarnation. There can be no greater affirmation of Creation than the Incarnation and yet, misconceptions about the nature of God and the confusion between God and nature abound. It is, almost, a recurring theme throughout our western history in particular. Which is why the Iconoclastic Controversy of the Eighth Century (AD) is so important for us in our own day. It marks the intersection of the Judeo-Christian tradition with the forces of the recently ascendant Islamic religion. It brings out the very nature of the Christian understanding of the nature of God and his dealing with humanity.

Under the influence of the strong condemnation of images by Islam, essentially a re-iteration in the strongest way possible of the Second Commandment of the Decalogue, there was considerable opposition to the depictions of Christ. Out of the fight - and a fight it was - emerged a greater clarity about the Christian teaching. Of course, God is not to be confused with the created things of this world as if God were merely a projection of our human imaginations (interesting how contemporary ancient perspectives really are!). But in the Word made flesh, in the God made man, in short in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, don't things take on a new perspective?



Indeed, they do! You see, God has embraced his creation. God has become man. Which doesn't mean the collapse of the one into the other or vice-versa. We live in the dialectic of this relationship. It belongs to the heart of the Christian witness.

The divine and the human meet in Jesus Christ. To depict the one is to depict the other while thought itself makes the distinction which aesthetic judgment at best intuits. But what an intuition! In Christ there is the redemption of the whole of creation without "*the confusion of the Godhead into flesh, but rather through the taking of the manhood into God*" (*The Athanasian Creed*, BCP, p. 697). The Christian religion argues not only that our humanity is incomplete without God but that our humanity actually participates in the divine life in which it finds and enjoys its perfection. Hard as it may seem, this is actually the logic that underlies each and every activity which seeks to address the forms of human suffering. In Christ, we see the radical meaning and truth of what it means to be made in the image of God. The Arts recall us to God in the beauty of holiness.

But iconoclasm? Idolatry? What are they about? Simply confusion. Either confounding the substance of divinity with the material universe (idolatry) or separating God completely from the redemption of his creation and its representation (iconoclasm).

Idolatry, especially, we might say, is the great 'no, no' of revealed religion because it betrays the mystery of the transcendent God.

Christianity heightens this 'no, no' precisely because God embraces the world which he has made and which has turned away from him. It is the profoundest form of redemption imaginable. It is at the heart of the rhythms and patterns of our liturgy.



Back-to-Church Sunday is September 26th in the Anglican Church of Canada. It is a project intended to stop and reverse the sad decline of the Anglican Church of Canada into oblivion. But the project recalls us to the primary and important question. Why return unless there is something to which to return? This, too, is a recurring theme of the Judeo-Christian and even Islamic religion, namely, the idea of return, of repentance, of renewal through the rediscovery of truths, at once '*tam antiquo, tam novo*', as St. Augustine memorably put it, truths so ever old and yet so ever new. The return is not about gimmicks.

It is about the thoughtful re-appropriation of the Christian essentials of the Faith, not the least of which is the doctrine of the Incarnation. This is the great teaching which catapults us into the communion of the Trinity, into the very presence of the God who is love.

Today, we celebrate the remarkable achievement of having attained Provincial Heritage designation for Christ Church. It is a way of helping to preserve the building but with the objective of upholding its primary reason for being. It is a place of worship. It exists for a purpose which points us beyond itself. It is the holy space where we find ourselves in the presence of the God who *"so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* Strong words. But they speak to the purpose of our churches in the land. They are the strong reminders to us of the presence of God in human lives. Like sentinels in the land, they recall us to the truth and majesty of the God who bestows dignity and grace upon our humanity.



It is, to be sure, a melancholic object to contemplate the loss and destruction of so many of our churches in the land, closures that are at once understandable and regrettable. There is the deconsecration

of little St. Mary's, Sonora, a church built at the instigation of the Rev'd Joseph Alexander, the great 19th century missionary priest of the Eastern Shore; there is the deconsecration of St. Matthew's, Walton, a church which is to be shipped by barge up the Avon River to become part of a Winery; and there is the sad and sorry spectacle of the taking apart of All Saints', Granville Ferry, a Bishop Inglis Church which has been shipped off to Louisiana, despite the willingness of the local historical society to take care of it. This was the catalyst for Peter Coffman's whimsical and yet poignant portrayal of Nova Scotian Churches in his "*Anglicana Tales*" exhibit at the Dalhousie Art Gallery last spring, from which these pictures, with his permission, are taken. And how many more churches have already been consigned to the Home Renovator's market to become quaint and eloquent features of some modern home?

There is, I think, a kind of sadness about these things. We face, on the one hand, a sense of loss, especially in our rural communities in their struggles to survive, and, on the other hand, the rage to destroy that seems intent on removing as many church buildings as possible from the land. The desire to hold on and preserve the little (and big) churches in the land is sometimes derided and dismissed as 'steeple-worshipping', in other words, a form of idolatry, while the rage to destroy seems a form of iconoclasm. Idolatry versus iconoclasm?

The buildings, of course, exist for a purpose that goes beyond themselves. We do not worship steeples but the God to whom the steeples point us.

Have we lost that sense of the Gospel to which the buildings belong? Back-to-Church Sunday, in no small way, might be about reclaiming the Christian Gospel in the form of our own spiritual traditions and in the places that give visible expression to the worship of God. At least we have a Church to come back to in prayer and in humility and in the holy desire to sing God's praises with understanding. O come, let us worship!

Fr. David Curry
Christ Church

The Heritage Significance of Christ Church

Christ Church has considerable heritage significance for the town of Windsor and the surrounding area, for the province of Nova Scotia and for the nation of Canada. While the building dates from 1882, the Anglican Parish reaches back to the 1770s and has historic connections to Bishop Charles Inglis, the First Bishop consecrated for a Diocese overseas, to the Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, to the University of King's College (located in Windsor until 1920), to King's-Edgehill School (formerly King's Collegiate (1788) and Edgehill School for Girls (1791), both Anglican foundations which merged in 1976), and to the military presence in Windsor, particularly the formation of the 112th Battalion, formed in 1916. In short, Christ Church plays a significant role with respect to education, to the military, and to cultural life, locally and beyond.

The connection to Bishop Inglis and the earlier history of the Parish is captured in a window which came from the original Christ Church, a building designed by Inglis, which formerly stood on what is now called *The Old Parish Burying Grounds*. The window in question is in memory of *Harry King, Esq., D.C.L.*, the son of a long-standing early rector of Christ Church, and an early headmaster of King's Collegiate School, *the Rev'd Wm. Colsell King*. Another window in the present structure signals the Parish's connection to one of Windsor's most celebrated literary and political figures, *Thomas Chandler Haliburton*, who was a parishioner and benefactor of the Parish of Christ Church. The Haliburton Window was installed and dedicated in 1902.

Through the College and the School, Christ Church connects to other aspects of the literary and cultural heritage of Windsor and beyond in relation to such figures as *Charles G.D. Roberts* who lived and taught at the University of King's College in Windsor for ten years (1885-1895) during the first decade or so of the present building where he would have attended Divine

Worship. His first cousin, *Bliss Carmen* also visited Windsor and would have attended Christ Church, as, perhaps, did Charles G.D. Roberts' remarkable protégé, *Sophia Almon Hensley*, poet and author from Bridgetown, who was resident in Windsor during his tenure at King's.

Other literary connections with the Parish reach back to *Deborah How Cottnam*, poet and educator, who survived captivity by the French at Louisbourg as well as the American Revolution, retiring to Windsor in the late eighteenth century where she died and was buried in the Old Parish Burying Grounds in 1806, and *Griselda Tonge*, described by Joseph Howe as "*the highly gifted songstress of Acadia*", celebrated for her mastery of the Spenserian stanza, born in 1803 and resident in Windsor before her untimely death in Demarara, British Guiana, in 1825.

Hensley Memorial Chapel at King's-Edgehill School and Christ Church in town were the only Churches to have survived the great Windsor fire of 1897. Christ Church, along with the other Anglican institutions in Windsor, namely, King's and Edgehill, provided sanctuary for the other Christian denominations in Windsor whose buildings had been lost in the fire.

The present Christ Church building was designed by a noted Worcester, Massachusetts, architect, *Stephen Earle*, who had previously designed Trinity Church, Digby, the plans of which were provided to the Parish of Christ Church on the stipulation that no alterations be made to those plans. They were also used for St. Paul's, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland. Built by the well-known local contractor, *Joseph Taylor*, Christ Church stands as a fine example of the Gothic Revival or Carpenter Gothic architecture; particularly noteworthy are its Alpha and Omega beams. The building is constructed entirely from wood obtained locally. It also contains the first pipe organ in Windsor, the dedication of which was a very significant cultural event for the town of Windsor in the early 1890s.

Adapted from the Parish Application for Provincial Heritage Designation.