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THE EARLY CHURCH ON THE ANICONIC SPECTRUM

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The issue of images in the early church is beset with fuzzy thinking and imprecise terminology, even among scholars. By precisely defining *aniconic*, *icon*, and *iconography*, this article seeks to awaken scholars to greater clarity, and thus a grasp of the nuances, categories, and full range of aniconism (the opposition to icons). Historically, the terms are new, with "aniconism" (*Anikonismus*) and "aniconic" (*anikonisch*) only being introduced in the late nineteenth century. Through defining aniconism, we see that it is not a monolithic phenomenon; the choice is not a binary one between a rigorous aniconism on the one hand and a full-blown iconography on the other. Rather, there is a spectrum to aniconism, from the rigorous prohibition of all images to the lax position that only draws the red line at worship. This article further examines the exact nature of the early church's aniconism, whether it was truly austere or more lax, through an inventory of the early church's main statements on images, including writings by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, the Council of Elvira, Eusebius, and Epiphanius.

The issue of images in the early church is beset with fuzzy thinking and imprecise terminology, even among scholars, and either apathetic ignorance or heated dogmatism on the part of the laity. Awakening interest in the apathetic or cooling the hot-headedness of zealots is not our concern here. Rather, the aim of this article is to awaken scholars to greater clarity hoping they, in turn, will address the apathetic and misinformed. While strides have been made in the last quarter century in bringing more depth and nuance to our understanding of images in the first four centuries of Christian history, a key category, namely icons, is often missing, and unfocused terminology lingers. The consensus from twentieth-century scholarship to the present day is that the early church was dedicated to an "austere aniconism," that is, opposed to icons.[1]

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[1] Andrew Louth, *Greek East and Latin West*, vol. 3 of *The Church in History* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 43. While some debate this conclusion, Ernst Kitzinger's 1977 article "The Cult of Images in the Period Before Iconoclasm" is seen as so "defining," so "deeply influential" that few scholars contest the claim today (Charles Barber, "The Truth in Painting:

Nevertheless, the exact nature of the early church's aniconism, whether it was really "austere" or not, seems to be muddled, particularly by the inexact use of terms, even by scholars who are normally otherwise extremely exacting. Modern Protestants, in particular, have given too little attention to the topic (with some exceptions), so much so that the terminology around the issue is new and foreign to many of us. Historically, the terms are new, with "aniconism" (*Anikonismus*) and "aniconic" (*anikonisch*) only being introduced in the late nineteenth century by Johannes Adolph Overbeck (1826–1895). In this article, I seek to describe the relevant terms and then track, as far as possible, the main statements from the early church on images on the range of aniconism.

I. *Icons and Aniconism: A Precise Definition*

First, the definition of our main term, "aniconism," is a matter of debate. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines it as "opposition to the use of icons or visual images to depict living creatures or religious figures."[2] That definition is imprecise, though typical for the use of the term.[3] It can imply that icons and visual images are synonymous; it implies that aniconism is opposed to images in any context or use. Opposition to icons, as we will see, is a narrow restriction. Aniconism can simply be an opposition to images in worship, while fully tolerant of images and art in all other forms. A ham-fisted opposition to all visual images generally, as the *Britannica* defines it, is extremely broad. That would be a rigorous form of aniconism. Some, assuming rigorous (or "austere") aniconism is the only kind, claim that the idea of aniconism itself is an unattainable "myth."[4] But this is a result of the ill-defined use of the term.[5]

Much of the confusion, it appears, stems from a lack of clarity of what exactly is being prohibited. Take the word "aniconism" apart etymologically. It derives from Greek εἰκών ("icon") with the negative prefix *an-* (Greek privative alpha, thus "non-") and the suffix *-ism* (Greek ισμός, a belief in). The Greek core of the

Iconoclasm and Identity in Early-Medieval Art," *Speculum* 72 [1997]: 1019). Louth concurs on the impact of Kitzinger's article.

2 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Aniconism," https://www.britannica.com/topic/aniconism.

3 Similarly, Batairwa K. Paulin defines aniconism as "a general term referring to the absence of images or figurative representations" ("Aniconism and Sacramentality: Rethinking the Riddles of Representing the Sacred" [unpublished paper, 2014], 59, http://www.academia.edu/12301242/Aniconism_and_Sacramentality_Rethinking_the_Riddles_of_Representing_the_Sacred).

4 Aniconism refers to the ambiguous "historiographic myth that certain cultures, usually monotheistic or primitively pure cultures, have no images at all, or no figurative imagery, or no images of the deity" (Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000], https://jehovahsabaoth.wordpress.com/category/history/page/5/).

5 The "ubiquitous use [of the terms aniconic and aniconism] can give the impression that they describe a well-circumscribed category. Yet … 'aniconism' was not introduced into modern scholarship as the term for a clearly defined phenomenon that could be identified in an empirical investigation" (Milette Gaifman, "Aniconism: Definitions, Examples and Comparative Perspectives," *Religion* 47 [2017]: 336).

word, εἰκών, meant any image generally. (This fact causes some of the modern confusion.) However, the term *icon*, as described below, has become a technical term for a particular type of image. Aniconism, then, is the lack of icons.

So, to understand aniconism, we need first to understand what an icon is. I believe we should yield to the expertise of the iconophiles on exactly what icons are; that is, let those who use and have thought most deeply about icons tell us what makes an icon and iconography. First, note that theologians who specialize in and affirm icons differentiate between art (including imagery and decorations) and icons. Hilarion Alfeyev, a bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church, notes, "The icon's purpose is *liturgical*." Hence, "A gallery is the wrong place for icons."[6] "Icons are not 'art' in the modern sense of individual expression, although they have many aesthetic qualities. Icons are a collaboration between the writer and the spirit."[7] The website of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America defines an icon thus:

> In the Orthodox Church an icon is a sacred image, a window into heaven. An image of another reality, of a person, time and place that is more real than here and now. More than art, icons have an important spiritual role.… The primary purpose of the icon is to aid in worship.[8]

The Orthodox Church of Estonia notes, "The word 'icon' is normally used to refer to images with a religious content, meaning and use.… The production of icons is a mode of prayer; they come from prayer to be used in prayer and worship."[9] Thus, an icon is a religious image used in acts of worship. The *sine qua non* of an icon is its intentional use in religious devotion. Any image, even of sacred subjects, that is not used liturgically, engaged by the worshiper, is not an icon. It may only be art or decoration.

Hence, all images are not icons. Icons, by definition, are images meant to be used in worship. Aniconism is the opposition to that particular type of image. Aniconism, then, is the belief that icons ought not be used. It is rejection of icons. Hence, Milette Gaifman defines aniconism as "denot[ing] divine presence without a figural image in religious practice."[10] Likewise, for Tryggve N. D. Mettinger aniconism refers to "cults where there is no iconic representation of the deity (anthropomorphic or theriomorphic) serving as the dominant or central cultic symbol."[11] Hence, aniconism applies not to the walls of one's

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[6] Hilarion Alfeyev, "Theology of Icon in the Orthodox Church" (lecture at St. Vladimir's Seminary, February 5, 2011), https://mospat.ru/en/2011/02/06/news35783/ (emphasis is original).

[7] Patricia Miranda, "The Tradition of Iconography," The National Altar Guild Association, 2011, http://www.nationalaltarguildassociation.org/?p=796.

[8] Cindy Egly, "Eastern Orthodox Christians and Iconography," http://antiochian.org/icons-eastern-orthodoxy.

[9] "Icons," http://www.orthodoxa.org/GB/orthodoxy/iconography/whatisaniconGB.htm.

[10] Gaifman, "Aniconism: Definitions, Examples and Comparative Perspectives," 335.

[11] Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, "The Absence of Images: The Problem of Aniconic Cult at Gades and Its Religio-Historical Background" *SEL* 21 (2004): 89.

home, the pictures in one's wallet, or the art in a gallery but "the framework where religion is performed."[12] That is, aniconism means that images are not used in worship (however one defines worship). Aniconism, at its barest, is imageless worship.

However, is this modern definition of icons, differentiating them from images generally, also that assumed by the early church? Am I reading back, anachronistically, a sophisticated, nuanced understanding of icon that the early church would not have held? I do not believe I am. Indeed, I believe that the early church, arising in a culture with a ubiquitous use of icons and idols as well as art and other images, had a sophistication to their understanding of icons vis-à-vis art that surpasses that of modern scholars who largely have not experienced the regular practice of images as a focal point in acts of organized worship. As we will see in the sources below, early church leaders would distinguish between admirable art and the use of some of that art as icons (or idols) after the "manner of the Gentiles," venerated "according to a habit of the Gentiles." We will see that idol making was prohibited but not sculpture, and that a church council distinguished between mere pictures that are not prohibited and "objects of worship and adoration" that are. Hence, the modern theologians of icons who have differentiated between art and icons are, indeed, describing a category that the early church would have recognized.

Thus iconography, in Christian history, is the use of icons, not a term (as in some art history) for symbolism. This is a crucial distinction. It means that aniconism—opposition to icons—is not necessarily opposition to art and other images, not even of religious subjects. As soon as there was Christian art, such as the cross or the fish, there was iconography in the art history sense. But whether there was iconography in the theological sense—the use of icons—is another question. Hence, there can be Christian art and symbolism (like the cross) without iconography, while the early Christians were still aniconic. Aniconism is not necessarily austere. One can still be "aniconic" (opposed to icons) and allow decorations, symbols, even be an admirer of art.

Is there a distinction between icons and idols? That is an inflammatory question.[13] I do not see that refereeing that debate is necessary for this article. What is necessary is to understand the nature of icons, over against a mere image or decoration, and how the early church considered them. Both thoughtful aniconists—at least moderate and lax ones—and iconodules say that it is the use of an image in worship that makes the image an icon.

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[12] Paulin, "Aniconism and Sacramentality," 76.

[13] Aniconists, especially rigorous ones, would often claim that any image used in worship, whether purported to be an "icon" or not, is an idol and thus prohibited by the second commandment (Exod 20:4–6). Iconodules (supporters of icons) would disagree and claim that, per John of Damascus, the incarnation is a "game-changer" (Elias Andersen, "Icons Are Not Idols," Orthodox Christian Fellowship, November 11, 2015, http://www.ocf.net/icons-are-not-idols/). However, John of Damascus (c. 675–749) was an early medieval theologian, not one of the early church.

II. *The Spectrum of Aniconism*

The goal of aniconism is to prevent images from being used in worship—thus becoming "icons." How to achieve that goal is not always agreed upon. Aniconism is not monolithic. It can take many expressions. For example, in Second Temple Judaism, the determination to avoid the idolatry of Israel's past resulted in building a fence around the second commandment (Exod 20:4–6).[14] Traditions regulated what kinds of images could be used and under what circumstances. Josephus tells how Pontius Pilate caused an uproar by introducing images on Roman standards in Jerusalem, provoking a mob of Jewish men daring him to execute them.[15] Such was their zeal for their rigorous aniconism. Jewish coins of the Hasmonian period (c. 140–c. 116 BC) did not have human or animal images, but images of palm trees, stalks of wheat, *lulavs* (date palm frond), and *etrog* (citrons).[16] A cache of Jewish coins discovered in 2014 from AD 69–70 show that "Jewish coins of the era were characterized by images that strictly obeyed the second commandment," their aniconic interpretation of the second commandment, that is.[17]

To understand aniconism, we must understand the wide range of approaches that go under its umbrella. It can be as rigorous as prohibiting all images of anything that can be reflected in water or as lax as encouraging the flourishing of art and decorations as long as they are not the direct focus of acts of devotion. Hence, there is a spectrum of aniconism.

Rigorous aniconism insists that the objects in the natural world or realities in the supernatural realm not be represented in any visible way.[18] At its most rigorous, the ban may encompass all living beings, as in some forms of Sunni Islam and some early church theologians. In its most rigorous, "austere," form, aniconism may mean the absolute prohibition of all images that resemble anything in the natural world, so that visual art, if it exists at all, is confined to mosaics and abstracts. When this prohibition results in the destruction of

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[14] In *Pirkei Avot* (1:1), "Ethics of the Fathers" (a tractate of the Mishna), the Men of the Great Assembly resolved to "make a safety fence around the Torah" (1:1), http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/682498/jewish/English-Text.htm. They based this on Lev 18:30, which states, "You shall *safeguard* My charge not to do any of the abominable traditions that were done before you," and other texts. Though Christians are most aware of their fences around the fourth (Sabbath) commandment, the second commandment also had fences around it.

[15] Josephus, *J.W.* 2.169.

[16] Colin Shindler, "Pocket History: The Secrets of Ancient Coins," *The Jewish Chronicle*, August 29, 2017, https://www.thejc.com/judaism/features/pocket-history-the-secrets-of-ancient-coins-1.443425.

[17] Ran Shapira, "Hoard of Bronze Coins from Jewish Revolt Found Near Jerusalem," *Haaretz*, August 17, 2014, https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/coins-from-jewish-revolt-found-1.5259719.

[18] "According to Tryggve Mettinger, in aniconic cults 'there is no iconic representation of the deity (anthropomorphic or theriomorphic) serving as the dominant or central cultic symbol, that is, where we are concerned with either (a) an aniconic symbol or (b) sacred emptiness'" (Gaifman, "Aniconism: Definitions, Examples and Comparative Perspectives," 337).

images, aniconism becomes iconoclasm. Iconoclasm is rigorous aniconism militantly applied.

Aniconists might differ about where they allow images. The rigorous allow them in no context; the lax allow them in any context; some fall somewhere in between. Since aniconism, at its most essential, is about preventing the use of images in worship, one aniconic strategy is to prohibit worship spaces from including any images. Thus, in this approach to aniconism, sacred spaces are set off as image-free zones. If there are no images where worship occurs, icons cannot develop. Mettinger described "empty space aniconism," using for an example two empty throne-like chairs cut into the rock in the island of Chalke, off the coast of Rhodes, inscribed with the names of Zeus and Hekate. The empty seats were apparently created by an aniconic cult.[19] Similar approaches to aniconism seem to be reflected in Christian circles. For example, while the Christian house church in Dura-Europas had various decorations, the large hall, where presumably the church met, had "no paintings."[20] In other words, while there are frescoes in other rooms in the house-church, the actual worship space contained no images. Even if the purported baptistery with images was really a baptistery, and not a bathroom, images may only be decorations and not necessarily icons. The Council of Elvira's prohibition against images in church buildings, canon 36 (see below), likewise seems to follow this strategy without discouraging Christian art in other contexts. In this laxer form of aniconism, images purporting to be of God or Christ or other holy figures may be allowed in homes, in wallets, and anywhere else except the places of worship.

Aniconism may express itself in prohibiting certain images of holy figures, such as depictions of God or extend to "saints," like "the prophet" or Messiah. The reasoning is that such depictions must necessarily be treated with respect, thus venerated, and thus involve idolatry, the giving of worship to an image. All other images are permissible, although not as foci in worship. In some contemporary Islamic, aniconic societies, photographs and portraits of family, art for decoration, heads of state on currency, and so on are still not forbidden.

The imprecise terminology has resulted in some archaeological finds being used as the basis to question the otherwise widespread conclusion of scholarship that the early church was aniconic. The images in catacombs or the house church of Dura-Europas suggest, some claim, that it was not really anionic after all.[21] But this is based on a simplistic definition of aniconism, that to be aniconic one must be rigorous, strictly opposed to all images in all contexts and thus the discovery of any images means that the early church was not aniconic, that

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[19] Gaifman "Aniconism: Definitions, Examples and Comparative Perspectives," 338.

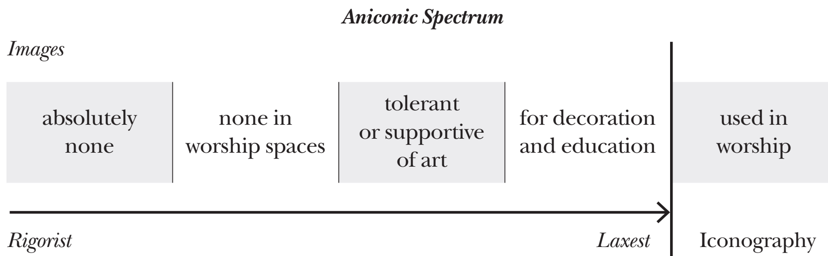
[20] Steven Bigham, *Early Christian Attitudes toward Images* (Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2004), 68.

[21] For example, Louth cites Dura-Europas as evidence that the "austere aniconism" of the early church is a "caricature" (*Greek East and Latin West,* 43.) Bigham goes so far as to claim that the Dura-Europas house church gives credence to the claim that the full-blown iconography of the Second Council of Nicea in 787 has roots in the apostles (*Early Christian Attitudes toward Images,* 78).

it, in fact, practiced iconography. Thus the issue is framed as if it were a strictly binary choice, between the austere absence of any imagery, a complete lack of art and decorations in what is called "aniconism," on the one hand, or the fully developed iconography, with its venerated icons used in worship, on the other. This is not the case and flattens the many dimensions of aniconism and the nuanced approach of the early church.

Certainly the catacombs demonstrate the existence of early Christian decorations and symbolism. But the discovery of early Christian art cannot be reflexively assumed to be the discovery of iconography until it is proven that the images were used in worship. This holds true for Jewish synagogues too. The images uncovered in the Dura-Europas synagogue prove that decorations were tolerated by some and hence that Judaism and early Christianity were not universally austere in their aniconism. They do not necessarily prove any iconography. Besides, even such synagogues were a rarity. Archaeologist Jodi Magness noted about an AD fifth-century synagogue found in 2012 with art, "Synagogues of this particular type—which is best represented by the synagogue at Capernaum just a couple of miles away—typically do not have mosaic floors."[22] Even those that do, however, represent a laxer aniconism, although not necessarily so lax as to cross the line into iconography.

Finally, aniconism may even be as lax as allowing images in the worship spaces, even images of the divine, as long as those images are not directly involved in worship; they do not become a focus or tool in prayer or any devotional activity. This is the laxest form of aniconism and is likely that practiced by the majority of modern Protestants, usually unreflectively. A picture of Christ may adorn a Sunday School room, or banners with images of the lamb of God may hang in the sanctuary, or the major dramatic points of the Bible may be depicted in stained glass, or images reflecting views of the appearance of Jesus and the Apostles may flash from projectors during singing, but never do those images become themselves venerated or prayed before. This is still, because these images do not cross into icons, aniconism. This range of aniconism maybe graphed thus:



[22] A. R. Williams, "Surprising Mosaics Revealed in Ancient Synagogue in Israel," *National Geographic*, July 17, 2015, https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/07/150717-mosaics-synagogue-israel-magness-discovery-archaeology/.

III. *The Early Church on the Aniconic Spectrum*

Having thus seen the wide spectrum of aniconism, where does the early church fall on the aniconic spectrum? Archaeology has discovered Christian images in the early church, after 200.[23] But archaeology can rarely indicate the use of the images it uncovers. The crucial question is whether they ever crossed the red line separating aniconism from iconography. The imagery that developed in the third and fourth centuries is mainly narrative, such as Noah's ark, and was not likely to have encouraged worshipers to offer it veneration or be a focus in prayer. It was art for viewing, not icons for worship.[24] What archaeology cannot tell us, the written testimony of the early church can. The references to images in worship by the early church are few enough that we can take an inventory of them and track them on the aniconic spectrum.

While, on the one hand, Irenaeus (c. 130–202) spoke admirably of art, "a beautiful image of a king … constructed by some skillful artist,"[25] on the other hand, he says this of the Gnostic Carpocratians' use of icons:

> They also possess images, some of them painted, and others formed from different kinds of material; while they maintain that a likeness of Christ was made by Pilate at that time when Jesus lived among them. They crown these images, and set them up along with the images of the philosophers of the world that is to say, with the images of Pythagoras, and Plato, and Aristotle, and the rest. They have also other modes of honoring these images, after the same manner of the Gentiles.[26]

First, his approval of art suggests that he was not a rigorous aniconist. He appears to allow for art, in some contexts. However, that does not mean he was therefore an iconophile. That he refers to the crowning and honoring of the images as being "after the same manner of the Gentiles" suggests that they were being used not simply as decorations but as icons. Of this use of an image in worship he implicitly disapproves while not necessarily condemning all images, thus making him a moderate or lax aniconist.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) wrote, "Works of art cannot then be sacred and divine."[27] This is first a denial of iconography and thus some form of aniconism. Clement believed that the second commandment prohibited all images. His was a rigorous aniconism. This created a problem, however, with what to do with the images in the tabernacle; there were, for example, cherubim carved into the ark of the covenant (Exod 25:19). This was inconsistent with Clement's rigorous aniconism. His solution was to allegorize the passage so that

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[23] "No distinctly Christian art predates the year 200. This is a simple statement of fact" (Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994], 99).

[24] Robin M. Jensen, "Aniconism in the First Centuries of Christianity," *Religion* 47 (2017): 408.

[25] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.8.1.

[26] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.25.6.

[27] Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, 7.5.

it was no longer historical, thus preserving the integrity of his rigorism.[28] That such a position seems to be more rigorous than Scripture mandates manifests the seriousness with which many in the early church took avoiding idolatry, which they would not have differentiated from iconography.

Similarly, Tertullian (c. 155–c. 240) wrote, "Similitude [is] interdicted."[29] He, like Clement, was a rigorist and, like Clement, he was presented with the problem of what to do with the imagery in the OT, especially God's instruction to Moses to make a "bronze serpent" (Num 21:4–9). He concluded that the image of the serpent in the wilderness was an "extraordinary precept" (i.e., a rare exception). We are only allowed to follow suit, he wrote, if, like Moses, God has bidden us to do so. He supported requiring artists to cease from fashioning images as a precondition to being accepted into the church. Such was his rigorous aniconism.

Simultaneously, "The Apostolic Tradition" (attributed to Hippolytus of Rome, c. 235) took a more lax approach: "If someone is a sculptor or a painter, let them be taught not to make idols. Either let them cease or let them be rejected."[30] Note the implicit allowance of making non-idolatrous images. Simply fashioning images is not prohibited. If Hippolytus was rigorously aniconic, forbidding all images absolutely, a general statement, such as Tertullian's, would have been appropriate rather than the targeted restriction he issued. This appears to reflect a laxer form of aniconism in which images are allowed for non-religious or non-cultic purposes. Such lax aniconists do not have the problem Clement and Tertullian did with explaining the images of the OT because they could simply say that those OT images were not used directly in worship. We do not have enough information to pin-point Hippolytus's aniconism, whether he would be so lax as to allow the images in worship spaces.

We know from Tertullian's off-hand mention, in about 210, of an image of "The Good Shepherd" on a chalice used by a bishop that such decorated items were used.[31] However, the reference is obscure. Shepherd imagery was popular on earthenware, at least lamps, in Roman culture. It was an image in the popular culture that "Christians could easily adopt and adapt to their own universe of private meetings."[32] But we have no evidence that the image was used in worship, as a focal point in an act of devotion. Did the recipients of the wine from that chalice kiss or otherwise venerate the image during the Eucharist? We have no idea. Given Tertullian's rigorous aniconism and his hostility to the bishop with the chalice, had it crossed the line into iconography likely Tertullian would have used that as a basis for more invective.[33] Tertullian's

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[28] Bigham, *Early Christian Attitudes toward Images*, 133.

[29] Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 5.

[30] *Apostolic Tradition*, 16.3.

[31] "… that 'Shepherd,' will play the patron whom you depict upon your (sacramental) chalice" (Tertullian, *On Modesty*, 10).

[32] Finney, *Invisible God*, 126.

[33] Bigham suggests that Tertullian's failure to condemn as idolatrous the image of the Good Shepherd on the chalice of the bishop he was otherwise attacking verbally may mean that he

obscure reference to the chalice shows that Tertullian's rigor was not shared by some, if not most, Christians by his day; that some Christians tolerated, if not adopted, the imagery that flourished in the popular culture. But we have no evidence that it crossed the line from decoration into iconography.

Explaining the absence of images in Christian worship was a staple of early church apologists, including Marcus Minucius Felix (d. c. 210), Anthengoras (c. 133–190), and Origen (184–254). Romans frequently considered the lack of religious images among Christians as *prima facie* evidence of atheism. These apologists were at pains to explain that was not so.[34]

The pagan philosopher and critic of Christianity Celsus (in "The True Word," second century) made the lack of Christian images a point of criticism as did Marcus Minucius Felix's fictional polytheist, Caecilius Natalis.[35] The fictional Caecilius Natalis asks, "Why do [Christians] have no altars, no temples, no public images?"[36] Origen replied to Celsus by admitting that Christians did not use images. He states that Christians "being taught in the school of Jesus Christ, have rejected all images and statues."[37] Jews and Christians are among "those who cannot allow in the worship of the Divine Being altars, or temples, or images." He mocked the contention that images were helpful in worship. Citing the second commandment he wrote, "It is in consideration of these and many other such commands, that [Christians] not only avoid temples, altars, and images, but are ready to suffer death when it is necessary, rather than debase by any such impiety the conception which they have of the Most High God."[38]

For both Marcus Minucius Felix and Origen, it would likely have been in their apologetic interests to counter their critics with the claim that Christians did, in fact, use images, like their pagan persecutors, if they could do that honestly. However, they could not, thus demonstrating that the church of the third century was aniconic. However, it is unclear whether it was rigorously so, prohibiting even Christian themed art in homes and Christian burial sites, or more moderate. Origen's insistence that Christians "have rejected all images and statues" is in the context of worship and may still represent a moderate aniconism that allowed art outside the church.

That large portions of the early church, at least, were aniconic is demonstrated with canon 36 of the Synod of Elvira (c. 300–314): "Pictures are not to be placed in churches, so that they do not become objects of worship and adoration."[39] The nineteen Iberian bishops did not necessarily discourage

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did not believe it was idolatrous, that his attitude had softened (*Early Christian Attitudes toward Images*, 131).

[34] Finney, *Invisible God*, 40.

[35] On Minucius's imaginary dialogue, see Jensen, "Aniconism in the First Centuries of Christianity," 409.

[36] Finney, *Invisible God*, 42.

[37] Origen, *Against Celsus*, 7.41.

[38] Origen, *Against Celsus*, 7.64.

[39] This translation is offered by the Catholic University of America. The canons can be read with commentary by Joseph Binterim, Karl Josef von Hefele, and others at http://www.conorpdowling

Christians from art, even of biblical or Christian subjects. If they had been rigorously aniconic, like Tertullian, they likely would have produced a canon similar to Tertullian's "similitude [is] interdicted." They did not. Instead they issued a targeted prohibition only against images in churches. Hence, the prohibition was specifically crafted to prevent iconography. They drew a red line with the church. Art was not allowed in churches where it had the potential to be used in worship. Some claim that canon 36 forbids only images representing God (because it says *adoratur*), and not other pictures, especially those of saints. But the canon also says *colitur* ("is honored").[40] Note the implicit distinction between mere decorations ("pictures") on the one hand, and "objects of worship and adoration" on the other. This suggests a high level of sophisticated understanding of the nuances of the aniconic spectrum. The canon was against any images in churches in order to prevent those images from becoming icons. That it warns against decorations potentially becoming "objects of worship" (i.e., icons) demonstrates a moderate aniconism, not banning images outright but not allowing them in the church either, even for decorative or educational purposes. Thus it was not a lax aniconism. However, by not condemning all imagery, which it implicitly admits exists, it suggests the synod also did not take a rigorously aniconic position. Elvira's canon 36 is a nuanced, moderate aniconism.

Early church historian Eusebius (c. 263–339) reported a statue in Caesarea Philippi of a man "clothed decently in a double cloak, and extending his hand toward" a kneeling woman, who, by his time, was interpreted to be the woman with an issue of blood (Luke 8:43–48). He mentions that the statue and its veneration was "according to a habit of the Gentiles" (i.e., pagans).[41] While some have taken his report as approving of the statue, his description of its veneration suggests disapproval.

About the year 327 Eusebius, then living in Jerusalem, reportedly received a letter from the emperor's sister Constantia asking him for a picture of Christ.[42] He reports that a woman had brought him two likenesses, which might be philosophers, but she claimed they were images of Paul and Christ.

.com/library/council-of-elvira. The Latin reads, "placuit picturas in ecclesia esse non debere ne quod colitur et adoratur in parietibus depingatur." Bigham, among others, suggests this translation, "It has seemed good that images should not be in churches so that what is venerated and worshiped not be painted on the walls" (*Early Christian Attitudes toward Images*, 161.) I do not see that the proposed alternative translation changes the two relevant statements: that pictures were not allowed in churches and that they did not want what is "worshipped and adored" depicted in images. In either translation it is a moderate aniconism.

[40] Aubespine held such a view. See Karl Joseph Hefele, *A History of the Christian Councils* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871), 161.

[41] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.18; and Eusebius, *Demonstration of the Gospel*, 4.9.

[42] Some scholars, such as Mary Charles Murray (1977) and Timothy Barnes (1981), have argued that the letter was a forgery (Jensen, "Aniconism in the First Centuries of Christianity," 420). However, given the hint of Nestorianism in the letter and the unlikelihood that an eighth-century iconoclast would imply Nestorianism, the letter should be taken at face value.

He confiscated them lest they should prove a stumbling block to her or others. He reminds Constantia that the apostle Paul declares his intention of "knowing Christ no longer after the flesh."[43] Eusebius wrote that even the incarnate Christ cannot appear in an image. "To depict purely the human form of Christ before its transformation, on the other hand, is to break the commandment of God and to fall into pagan error."[44] That he is not fierce in his denunciation of the Caesarea Philippi statue, as Tertullian likely would have been, but capable of a dispassionate report of it may only be an expression of his personality or it may demonstrate a less rigorous form of aniconism. His confiscation of images and his other comments, if authentic, show he was, indeed, aniconic and not lax.[45]

Epiphanius (c. 315–403) shows the church was firmly aniconic still by the late fourth century. He wrote in the last section of Letter 51 (c. 394) to John, Bishop of Jerusalem,

> I went in to pray, and found there a curtain hanging on the doors of the said church, dyed and embroidered. 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 loath 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.

He goes on to tell John that such images are "contrary to our religion" and to instruct the presbyter of the church that such images are "an occasion of offense."[46]

This is the first, and most referenced, of writings attributed to Epiphanius that were contested during the later iconoclastic controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries.[47] They show that the church by the late fourth century was still thoroughly aniconic. Even the church with the offending curtain on it was still within the aniconic spectrum as long as the image was not used in worship. Epiphanius does not suggest it was. It was the mere presence of the image in a church that seemed to offend him. The verdict on exactly where Epiphanius falls on the aniconic spectrum is less clear. He is certainly aniconic. Like the Council of Elvira he did not allow for images as decorations in churches. However, we do not know if he allowed for Christians to use images otherwise, as decorations, or whether he was tolerant of art. His was a moderate to rigorous aniconism.

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[43] "Eusebius of Caesarea," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, (40), https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wace/biodict.html?term=Eusebius%20of%20Caesarea.

[44] David M. Gwynn, "From Iconoclasm to Arianism: The Construction of Christian Tradition in the Iconoclast Controversy," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 47 (2007): 227.

[45] Timothy D. Barnes, "Notes on the Letter of Eusebius to Constantia (*CPG* 3503)," *StPatr* 47 (2010): 313–18.

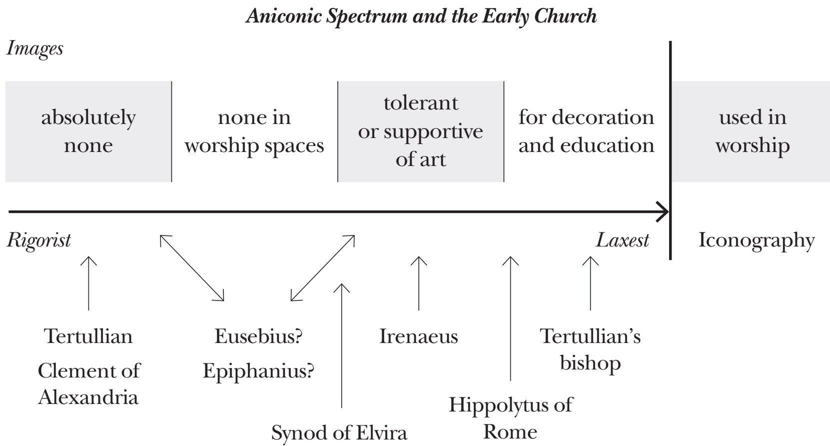
[46] Epiphanius, Letter 51, ch. 9, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001051.htm.

[47] For more on the authenticity of the letter, see John B. Carpenter, "Answering Eastern Orthodox Apologists Regarding Icons," *Them* 42, no. 3 (2018), https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/answering-eastern-orthodox-apologists-regarding-icons/.

IV. *Conclusion*

Thus concludes our inventory of the bulk of the extant writings of the early church on images in worship. This, then, is the evidence we have to evaluate where the early church falls on the aniconic spectrum. First, we can conclude that it definitely falls in the range of beliefs that are aniconic. We have no valid example of anyone from the early church using or teaching the use of icons. Using the term "iconography" for anything the early church did is confusing. It had some use of symbolic imagery as decorations, but as yet there is no example of the use of icons and hence no iconography. We have one account, via Tertullian, that seems to show a lax attitude toward images on the behalf of a bishop with a decorated chalice. We have more examples, in Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian himself, of rigorism. The bulk of the early church seems to have fallen into a medium between rigorism, with its absolute prohibition of all images, and a laxity that allowed for images in the church for decorative or educational purposes. It would not be until Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) supported the use of images as teaching tools for the illiterate that aniconism becomes more lax, but his attitude remained aniconic: "We commend you indeed for your zeal against anything made with hands being an object of adoration."[48]—and that was not until the early medieval period, outside the bounds of this study. As for the early church, aniconism apparently never became so lax. The majority report of the early church, then, was a moderate aniconism, as can be illustrated by the following:

Aniconic Spectrum and the Early Church



[48] Pope Gregory I to Serenus, Bishop of Massilia (Marseilles), http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360209105.htm.