The Affordances of Images: Religious Imagery and Iconoclasm from a Cognitive Perspective

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The Protestant reformers’ iconoclasm was not only a theoretical objection to what they considered the idolatry of religious images, but was, as well, a campaign for the removal (more or less violent in different places) and destruction of church art of all kinds. In sixteenth-century England there was less rioting and smashing than in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, but the end result was the same.¹ The first sets of Royal Injunctions issued during the reign of Henry VIII required the removal first of ‘abused’ images and statues – those that had become subject to superstitious ritual behavior – and shortly after, the removal of all the images furnishing all churches, painted on church walls, or in the stained glass of the windows. The reformers’ concomitant interest in replacing traditional image worship by Bible-reading, and their aim of providing universal access to the Scriptures in the vernaculars, however, was not easily accomplished.

The issue is this: the reformers were undoubtedly correct to surmise that the statues and images at the center of religious life for many Christians were, from the point of view of Church doctrine, fundamentally and grotesquely misleading, primarily by virtue of their materiality itself. Aiming at purging what they considered the accumulated error of the ages, the reformers’ proposed to replace the illegitimate veneration of images with the study of the Bible in the vernacular languages. Few, however, were aware of how difficult this project would be. The reformers themselves, literate in four or five languages, were apparently unaware of the enormous cognitive disaster they visited on masses of illiterate Christians by removing the support

of images in many places often a full generation before the substitute was available. Telling details have been collected by Ronald Hutton from church-wardens’ account books for the years between 1535 and 1570. The accounts reveal that there was often a gap of many years between the disappearance of the church’s statues and images, as required by law and enforced by visitation committees, and the actual purchase of an English Bible for the parish church. Hutton estimates that the majority of images were cleared from the churches within the three years between 1547 and 1550: ‘In [this] period [according to the account books] most of the churches ... were reglazed and coated with white lime on the interior, almost certainly to obliterate images in stained glass and wall-paintings’. On the other hand, ‘the single positive Injunction [of 1536], to buy an English Bible, was also the most widely flouted’. It had to be repeated again in 1547 and again by Elizabeth in 1559. ‘It can be said that the removal of Catholic decorations was more easily achieved than the substitution of Protestant texts’. But even where books were available, the obstacles to literacy were great. It is hard to escape the conclusion that in the lives of many individuals, especially older ones, the disappearance of the images was the equivalent of becoming suddenly blind in mid-life.

The book I have just completed, *Word vs. Image: Cognitive Hunger in Shakespeare’s England*, is a cognitive view of this cultural change. I specifically did not consider iconoclasm from the point of view of the contemporary theological polemic – that is well enough studied – but rather I tried to imagine the situation of those who were not asked whether they were interested in the changes in belief and behavior that motivated the reformers. Looked at this from the theological point of view, and before the historicist revolution of the last 35 years or so, the coming of the Reformation to England was widely understood as a

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3 Hutton, p. 121.
4 Hutton, p. 116.
5 Hutton, p. 137.
6 M. Aston, *England’s Iconoclasts*, Oxford 1988 is the most complete study of this period in England.
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sensible and inevitable abandonment of fussy medievalism and superstition by sensible English people gradually moving toward modernity. The violent outbreaks of iconoclasm that occurred in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands in the mid 16th century – destructive rioting by young zealots – had no real parallel in England. In most places, the removal of church rood-screens and crucifixes, statues and images, banners, candles, altars, stained-glass windows, wall-paintings and holy-water fonts was conducted in an orderly way with the probably reluctant cooperation of the pastors. The newer social historians of the Reformation, however, have studied the details of the changes over the 16th century, and it is now generally conceded that Protestantism was received only slowly by an often recalcitrant population, especially outside of London. The part of the problem I will not talk about today is just how hard it is to become literate when one is no longer young, and/or when there is no one available to teach you. I will just mention, however, a surprising statistic confirmed in several recent studies of literacy, and that is that between 17 and 20 per cent of the population in advanced industrial countries remain non-readers all their adult lives. On the other hand, anyone who is not blind sees and understands pictures.

Indeed, humans are visual-dominant. We learn vast amounts from birth and continually by seeing, and by making connections between the visual system and other sensory modules. But here is the important point: the visual system is not all ‘intake’. It is evolved to pick out of the visual field what J. J. Gibson called ‘affordances’. Affordances are aspects of the environment which offer various kinds of accommodation. Have a look at Figure 1, or Figure 2 if you are left-handed:

8 P. Collinson and C. Haigh are two of the leading revisionist historians of the English Reformation.
Figure 1
Milk Jug (author's photo)

Figure 2
Milk Jug (author's photo)
The handles on the two pitchers are affordances: they talk to you – they tell you how to relate to the pitchers – how to grasp them to fill them or pour out the contents. The furnishings of Catholic religious life were affordances: they invited specific responses, they invited interactive use. A child growing into a pre-Reformation community became an adult Christian by a sustained intimacy with the particular materials of religious life of that community. Individual minds and bodies grow into their world by extending the innate human neurological system in response to the environment. They actually grow the neural circuits that connect them to the material world around them. They construct the tools needed for the interactions their community expects, and learn the values connected to those actions within the community. Just as children learn what is nourishing food and what must not be eaten, they learn by watching and listening to adults how to behave in church, how to distinguish among the church’s various images, when and where to kneel, or light candles, and what tone of voice to use for prayer. They learn the place of the church’s images and statues in the church calendar, thus linking them with the liturgical seasons of celebration, with planting and harvest, and with the seasons of the year as felt on their skin. Insofar as their prayers are directed to the future, with hopes of intercession or reward, they also link the unmoving objects within the church to an idea of unseen movement, power, and control, and connect them to stories of saintly intervention in the past.

By the time they participate in the sacrament of the Eucharist for the first time they will have built the synapses that allow them to take part in a performance with elaborate setting and props, and with rich costumes for both statues and priest. Echoes of Latin texts will be linked to the continuing drama, along with incense, candles, and the patterned colored light that enters the church through stained glass windows. All parts of their human sensory system will have learned to participate: ‘the brain, body, and world are … united in an extended problem-solving web’ in ‘a deeply animated unity’.11

The network of connections among brain, body, and world instantiates the connection between the individual and the divinity; it

is that connection. The overwhelming theological problem of how that connection might actually happen would not have concerned most people, nor would it have prevented the satisfaction that came with growing into this sensual (visual, aural, kinetic) world.

Unfortunately, it is precisely the affordances of church imagery that mislead. For example, the pictures of God and the saints prompt worshippers to bring into cognitive play the things they know about ordinary people: what their postures and facial expressions can tell about how they are feeling or what they are thinking, what their garments tell us about their social status. These assumptions, enhanced by the worshippers’ faith and need, may be what produce the phenomenon of a devotee seeing movement in a painting or statue. Knowing whatever one comes to know about God cannot but be produced from the evolved channels of knowing that people normally use when they try to interpret the actions and feelings of other people with respect to themselves. There simply isn’t any other cognitive route to that knowledge. From a cognitive point of view, practicing one’s religion is not fundamentally different from practicing a tennis stroke: synapses grow in strength from use. Frequently used ones become stronger and accomplish their work with less conscious attention, while unused connections weaken and may disappear. Existing nets are open to further elaboration, and can grow toward complexity from simpler connections and interactions.

A stimulus to any of the part of the circuit initiates the activity of the whole network in which these different modes of knowing participate. The first crispy cold air in November can make even a Jewish song writer [Irving Berlin, in 1942] dream of a white Christmas. The multidirectionality of the dynamic among affordances and believers is itself generative: an icon, for example, which has survived a fire intact may be thought to protect against future fires.

In Michelangelo’s Pietà [Fig. 3 and Fig. 4] you can see the kind of confusion that worried the iconoclasts. What the statue affords is an image of deep yet calm or accepting sadness. The observer is invited thus to identify one’s own with Mary’s sorrow, and to accept it patiently as she does. And yet, this cannot be achieved without a concomitant confusion; the mother of the 33 year old Jesus is herself barely 20. Would the face of a 55 year old woman have evoked the same compassion? But how could an artist have portrayed the mother of god
as anything but an ideal beauty? The affordance here is not pure, and the confusion worried the reformers. But this is the easy case.
Figure 4
*The Pietà*, detail of the Virgin (photo: Scala/ Art Resource NY)
Look at Domenico Beccafumi’s picture [Fig. 5] of the moment of the miraculous interaction of the Dominican nun, Catherine of Sienna, with the image of Jesus. Catherine is said to have seen ‘the Lord fixed to his cross coming towards [her] in a great light’ striking her with shafts of light which caused stigmata to appear on her hands, feet, and side, reflecting the wounds he received at the crucifixion.

Note that the confrontation is understood as an exchange between the saint and a sculpted and painted crucifix, not between the saint and Jesus. In Beccafumi’s painting, the movement of the image toward Saint Catherine is suggested by the tilt of the carved figure, affirming the responsive power of the image which acts as miraculously as Jesus himself would. I count four levels of bodily analogy being afforded by this picture: the motivating level of analogy - the reason for the picture – is that the woman receiving the stigmata is thereby analogized to the incarnate suffering Jesus. The second analogy, without which the first could not be effected, is that between the crucified god and the carved image of the crucifixion. Next, the carved and painted body on the cross is analogized to the body of the saint, so that she receives the stigmata to her hands from the painted hands of the image, etc. as
indicated by the painted lines in the picture. One more layer of analogy is that between the viewer of the painting and the saint, the first meditating on Catherine’s exercise in identification. The painting affords the viewer all these bodily analogies, as the stigmata afford the saint her identification with Jesus. She knows in her body what he knew in his.

The biologist John Tyler Bonner argued the great evolutionary advantage of morphological plasticity and behavioral flexibility, and thus contributed to the development of the arguments against the view that the genes of an organism control or determine morphology and behavior. A culture is built, on this view, as a group of people learns how to arrange life within their environment (which includes the other people in the group and the material affordances the habitat supplies). It is hypothesized that an individual life is sustained by the brain’s constant adaptation or reorganization, kept in balance by the dynamic of homeostasis, that is, a drive toward maximum stability consistent with a functional configuration in the current environment. Imbalances in the system tend to stabilize themselves along a path of least resistance. Sampling and sensing change from within and without the boundaries of the self, organisms as small as cells have evolved to adjust automatically to try to repair imbalances by adjustments in the nervous and endocrine systems.

Cultural historians may observe a similar process among groups and individuals in the combination of individual and collective attempts to maintain stability. Cultural homeostasis depends on the self-correcting mechanisms of feedback loops that monitor the functioning of


13 This is presumably a factor in what S. Greenblatt, Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England, Oxford 1988, has in mind as cultural negotiations. While some people will be seeking change so as to improve their positions relative to others. Intentionality (‘agency’) may thus disturb the body’s automatic preference for stability.

conventional categorizations, for example, indicating where and when the current labels are no longer affording individuals or communities a satisfactory attunement within the environment.

The early environment of rural English children in the sixteenth century, for example, would have primed them to develop a category of semi-animate objects. Lacking schooling in Aristotelian logic, this counterfactual and even counterproductive category – including relics, rabbit’s feet, good luck charms etc. – would nonetheless have become embedded early in their brains. But here is where the organically evolved life of the community and the imposed ideology of the reformers conflicted. The theologians were not happy with this category of semi-animate objects. They worried correctly that simple Christians would ‘confuse’ the statue with the deity, that the statue was identical with the deity for them, and that the identity of the image with the god or the saint encouraged the mistaken assumption of the statue’s animacy.

Learned councils of churchmen had debated this issue: the doctrine of images articulated at the Second Council of Nicea in 787 and integrated with the rest of Catholic dogma by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* of 1273 made a clear separation: the image was not identical with the God, but was nevertheless worthy of honor for the sake of the God. Veneration of the image was declared to pass (miraculously) to the prototype, but the material image itself was only a sign.\(^\text{15}\) Our current understanding of the architecture of the human brain raises the possibility that even those who had been educated to follow the intellectual argument I have summarized, would, in the event, fail to perform the necessary mental separation between the image and the divinity.

Recent studies of active brains enabled by the new imaging techniques of computerized tomography [for example, fMRI, PET scanning]\(^\text{16}\) suggest that the brain manages seeing and remembering and perhaps also imagining something not seen from a common neural substrate. It does not, cannot, use entirely different circuitry to produce and differentiate the perception of a statue and a mental image or memory.

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This is not to say that people cannot tell the difference between a statue and a mental image of one: they surely can. The two do not normally overlap entirely. It is generally the case that recalled mental imagery is fuzzier and less complete, less detailed, and duller in color than perception. But since the Christian’s mental image of the deity has most likely itself been formed by a statue or image, it is easy for this close analogy to be mistaken for identity and for the two to be conflated, especially when there is no reason not to, such as during prayer, for example, in a darkened church, or in situations of stress. The overlap or confusion of the deity with the image, then, not the clarity of separation, is what one would expect from a brain whose evolved efficiency depends on its ability to reuse already in place circuits for additional purposes. So just where the theologian wants to stipulate clear non-overlapping categories, just where he wants to insist on an absolute distinction in a binary system (either something is divine or is not), many members of the community may not be in a position to disconnect the established connections that instantiate fuzziness on just these issues.

Just as a person seeing a pitcher with a handle ‘knows’ how to grasp it without abstract mediation (thoughts or words), worshippers feel the sorrow of the mother with her child across her knees in a direct, bodily way, a way of knowing that does not leave much room for the abstractions of the theologians. Furthermore, because the categorization powers of human brains work better in everyday life if small differences between members of a category are ignored, the non-identity of the picture and the god or saint as a stimulus for a human feeling is not an issue for the worshipper, though of course it is for the philosopher/theologian. Thus a statue of the Madonna virtually asks the worshipper who has been used to doing so to genuflect in its presence. The embodied connection creates an ‘action loop’ that needs

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little if any representation in words. For most people, action images or loops are not well connected to verbal cognition. In the normal course of events, embodied knowledge or habits would not be subject to discussion, and thus would never be abandoned for ‘logical’ reasons. If it is customary to bring the statue of the Virgin out to the fields of a village during planting time to insure sufficient rain, for example, it is pretty sure that a dry season would not convince anyone that the statue lacked power. Every example of either the success or failure of the rains would still be attributed to her will. Furthermore, there would be no learned way to control the recursive elaboration of the assumption of the statue’s quasi-humanity. If she is animate in regard to crops, it is easy enough to think that maybe she is like a human woman in other ways as well. Maybe she is displeased, and must be propitiated with greater sacrifices, new garments, or more jewels. Her attributes are not easily shaken loose from the neuronal schema which has, over the years, woven together the statue or image itself with needs, hopes, actions, beliefs, and past experience.

Given, then, what we know of the way organisms reuse and adapt structures already in situ to new or expanded functions, it was not even likely that brains would develop the kinds of structures that would produce the distinctions the reformers insisted upon. It is unlikely that a believer whose mental world included specific statues and images could ignore the experience those images afforded, and understand the images, or a visual memory of them, by means of the disembodied ‘cognition’ that Protestant churchmen described and hoped for. Most illiterate Christians could not turn the words they were newly offered (in sermons or in books) into an apprehension of an immaterial deity, certainly not into a satisfying one.

For a sympathetic nun praying in front of the picture of Saint Catherine, her receiving the stigmata of God’s pain was not an abstraction. It was represented in her head and through the circuitry of her central nervous system, down through her limbs, as she knelt and uttered the words of her prayer. It was an embodied experience. The connecting synapses had been strengthened by repetitive practice, not

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unlike that good tennis swing. The pre-Reformation Christian’s most valued experience of connection to the divinity had been built up from and with these material objects; and the continuation of the contact – of the religious experience – depended upon their presence. The destruction of the artifacts of prayer might be described as an amputation.

The reformers were surely right to complain that although Jesus had commanded only two practices – the two sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist – the Catholic Church had multiplied them to seven. From a cognitive point of view, however, it might be hypothesized that the addition of sacraments, to say nothing of the church windows, vestments, altar, candles, bells, banners, and the ceremonies and sanctifications concerning them, about which the gospels had not spoken a word, were understandable as attempts at cultural adaptation by people who found that the affordances of the “primitive church” did not sufficiently meet their needs. The accretion of material appurtenances and rituals were evidence of continuous attempts to fill perceived gaps in the original system.

The reformers, however, did not see the changes as reasonable behavior at all. They called the statues ‘poppets’ (dolls), and disparaged the traditional relationship of worshippers to them as ineffective and childish. They offered, as they saw it, a more appropriately adult religion. But how would the older generation of worshippers feel when the rood cross disappeared, replaced by a painted listing of the Ten Commandments, or in some churches, by the royal arms? By clearing the churches of religious art they were closing down one route for learning and coping, offering something else (the words of a sermon or the reading of a biblical text) that was cognitively so different as not really to be a substitute, and not clearly any more effective in the long run. Given the web of interdependencies that human beings build on vision, we may begin to see how counter-productive, indeed devastating, the reformers’ devaluation of learning by vision and by visual imitation must have been.

In conclusion, I would like to expand my claim for affordances in this way: what historians can now learn about the way human cognition works can be an affordance for scholars of cultural history, affording us an additional perspective on the times we study. It has allowed me to understand why what the reformers thought was a simple goal – the substitution of Bible reading for image veneration – was not at all as easy as they hoped it would be.