

Destruction of Culture and Vandalism

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While we can all condemn the destruction and defacing of antiquities and ancient sites that have been made by ISIS and earlier by the Taliban, one should put these acts in historical and religious context. Anyone reading the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition realizes that this behavior is well established in the tradition.

From the earliest Jewish communities destruction of idols was a part of expressing the nature of the relationship the people had with their one god. The same is true of the earlier Christians and pagan art and this continued into the Middle Ages with the burning of books of Greek and Roman writers, paintings of gods and battering to fragments of sculpture. After the discovery of the New World Christians eliminated entire cultural inventories of Native American civilizations, burning the Aztec and Mayan libraries and their art and demolishing their architecture as well as the Inca and all other Native peoples' objects of religion and culture.

The reason was the same, an extreme form of hatred for idolatry, in fact a period of history has been named after a fanatical wave of destruction in the 8th and 9th centuries in the Byzantine Empire, the Iconoclastic Controversy. It is significant that this occurred at just the same time as the spread of Islam from Saudi Arabia, but it was less violent than the suffering caused by the Inquisition in European and the Americas or the destruction of images of gods and ancestors caused by European colonialists in Africa, Asia and Melanesia/Polynesia.

While the vandalism of ISIS and the Taliban are the work of small bans of fanatics, the destruction organized under colonialism and earlier against paganism, was the official policy of churches and nations. The real question is not why these two minor movements have decided to destroy ancient sites and artifacts today, but why the Judeo-Christian tradition has been so intolerant. We should recall that Abraham came

from Ur in a time of chaos and destruction, and met a god on the way to Palestine with whom he entered into a covenant. This god being jealous demanded that Abraham and all his progeny worship only him in exchange for the god's love and protection, a Faustian bargain if there ever was one and therein lies the rub.

Mr. Bolchover (Financial Times "Jewish iconoclasm's irony and humour," March 19th 2015) argues that the Mishnah makes clear the evolution of Jewish thought regarding iconoclasm, significantly modifying the behavior of adherents of the faith. I do agree, yet as with Christian fundamentalists who regard scripture as the exact word of god, few of them read such texts as the Mishnah or the writings of Church scholars like St. Augustine, St. Jerome or Erasmus. Since the early 1980s when I published in *Nature* on work T.B. Kahle and I were doing on the Dead Sea Scrolls preservation [1-3], and then later in the journal *Radiocarbon*, on a comprehensive analysis of fragments of scripture and the manufacturing process and methods of authenticating surviving texts, I have urged people to read the commentaries on the texts in sources like the Mishnah. It is unfortunate that most people who consider themselves members of the Judeo-Christian tradition, no matter what sect, seldom are interested in this most illuminating body of literature. But then the same is true of the Hadith. Too many religious leaders interpret only the certainty they extract from the texts of scripture rather than the more nuanced meanings.

References

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Received: March 23, 2015; Accepted March 25, 2015; Published April 05, 2015

Citation: Caldararo N (2015) Destruction of Culture and Vandalism. *Anthropol* 3: 143. doi:[10.4172/2332-0915.1000143](https://doi.org/10.4172/2332-0915.1000143)

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