Abstract
The destruction of monumental Buddha sculptures in Bamiyan by the Taliban is commonly understood as an instance of long established Islamic iconoclasm. Painting modest clothing over images of nudes in Western textbooks at a women's university library in Arabia can be considered an act of censorship. Erasing or not including facial features in images of women in advertising and illustration in the Gulf region is variously seen as a nod to cultural norms or an exercise in gender oppression. This paper will explore these seemingly distinct phenomena with an intent to unravel the multiple veils of religion, culture and power that shroud understanding and use of the figurative image in Arabia and nearby regions. Contrary to common understanding, the region has historically been the home of a substantial body of figurative work, some preceding the advent of Islam, some created during the Islamic era, and a large volume imported or created during the recent wave of globalization. Creation and control of the meaningful image has been a constant in the power politics of religions, cultures, and nations. Likewise the defacement, destruction, or re-purposing of images meaningful to the "other" has been a common strategy in competitions for power and influence. Controversial images exist everywhere, but nowhere is the controversy more immediate than in the middle east today. Episodes involving use, distortion, and occasional destruction of images revolve around issues of power, persuasion, and the control of meaning.

Keywords: Education, iconography, Arabia, iconoclasm, religion, cartoons
Introduction

People should be able to form an adequate relationship with the godhead without the aid of a mediating object…But unfortunately they cannot.
--David Freeberg, *The Power of Images*

The murders at *Charlie Hebdo* once again bring to the forefront the constellation of issues revolving around images, image making and religion. The massacre is a recent example of a long history of destructive events revolving around figurative images both inside and outside the Islamic world. In the popular narrative, destruction of representational images is a fundamental Islamic principle, but the reality is more complex.

Controversy over images exist everywhere and in many historical periods. While other religions of the book have reached some accommodation with figuration and the icon, nowhere is the controversy more immediate than in the middle east today. Episodes involving use, distortion, and occasional destruction of images revolve around issues of power, persuasion, and the control of meaning.

The Islamic attitude toward the figurative image is often referred to as iconoclasm, a call for the destruction of icons, but it is more precise to say that the Islamic attitude is one of aniconism, an attitude against the making of icons. Brubaker and others prefer the term referred iconomachy—the image struggle (Brubaker, 2009, p.40). The physical breaking of images was not common in traditional Islamic societies although there are instances to the contrary.

The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban and the current wave of destruction of archeological artifacts by the Islamic State (ISIS) are exceptional events that do not fit the definition of iconoclasm. Before their destruction, Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar was quoted as saying the Buddhas of Bamiyan may

Figure 1. Large Buddha. Bamiyan, Afghanistan, before and after destruction. Left: UNESCO/A Lezine; Right: Carl Montgomery
be "a potential major source of income for Afghanistan from international visitors." The reason for their destruction is likely due to what a writer in *The Economist* described as a "fit of pique after the West offered money to preserve the statues, but no other aid" (*The Economist*, March 7-13th 2015, p. 34).

The Islamic State's destruction of sculptures in the Mosul Museum and the simultaneous destruction of rare books in the Mosul Library can best be described as a publicity event intended to demonstrate the firm control the new "caliphate" holds over its territory. To feed into ISIS's narrative of legitimacy derived from Koranic scripture, the events in Mosul echo the story in which Mohammad and his disciples destroy idols found around and inside the Kasbah in Mecca.

But the idols Mohammad encountered were still actively worshiped by residents of the area and so were still in a sense "alive," invested with supernatural qualities at least in the perceptions of their worshipers. By contrast, the sculptures in Mosul, many of which were reproductions, evolved out of ancient Assyrian belief systems that modern Iraqis not longer believe in. Similarly, by the time of the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, there were no devout Buddhists remaining in Afghanistan. Since the Islamic State has partly funded itself by looting archeological artifacts and selling them on the open market the most likely explanation for their destruction of the Mosul statues is that the few authentic sculptures were simply too large and cumbersome to be worth carting off to market.

In Christianity, The Book of Exodus contains a clear prohibition against image-making for purposes of idolatry. But the Koran contains no similar injunction (Criswell, 1946, p. 159). In the Arabian peninsula there is little history of figurative art; what images do exist from pre-Islamic times consist mainly of somewhat stylized images that appear in textiles, metal objects and pottery. According to Ali:

> Even before Islam, the Semitic peoples of the Middle East had no widespread naturalistic figurative tradition. The pre-Islamic Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula, whose verbal reality eclipsed the reality of the visual image, imported most of their idols from abroad; to them, the image was never a natural means of expression. For an Arab who could condense a whole doctrine into a crystal clear, short and concise verbal formula such as the *shahada* (a profession of faith), a printed or carved image seemed like a disquieting congealment of the spirit" (Ali, 1999, p. 9).

It is reported that the Prophet was familiar with figurative painting in the region. In one story, when Muhammad first entered the Ka'bah in Mecca (629–630 A.D.) he ordered the existing paintings within the structure to be destroyed, except for one; a painting of Mary and Jesus (Criswell, p. 160). Otherwise it is unclear whether existing visual likenesses were particularly important to the Prophet during his lifetime.
That an inanimate work of art can not only represent a living spirit, but can, once created, become that spirit in physicality, is not a new idea and is not one confined to so-called primitive cultures. It is a testament to the perceived magical power of figurative images that destruction of an icon often consists of defacement, either by obliterating the entire face, by scratching out or piercing the eyes, or by graphically slitting the throat. Flood (2002) quotes this passage from the ninth-century Book of Idols, offering a more vivid account of Mohammad's destruction of the icons within the Ka'bah:

When on the day he conquered Mecca, the Apostle of God appeared before the Ka'bah, he found the idols arrayed around it. Thereupon he started to pierce their eyes with the point of his arrow, saying, "Truth is come and false-hood is vanished. Verily, falsehood is a thing that vanish-eth [Qur'an 17:81]." He then ordered that they be knocked down, after which they were taken out and burned (Flood, p. 644).

Flood also recounts the report of Taliban officials slapping in the face a sculpture of a bodhisattva when he toured the Kabul Museum.

If icons are representations that have meaning to an idolater, but not to one's self, why "pierce their eyes" rather than simply smash the icon? In the Islamic State's videos inside the Mosul Museum great attention is paid to smashing heads and faces of the statues, as if they are living things whose power will not be extinguished until the face is gone and the eyes are no more. In The Power of Images, David Freeberg explores the potency of the image, whether consciously understood or not:

It is not, for the most part, that the painter is a magician, or even acts like a real magician; it is just that when images are set among us, the dead are kept among the living and inert matter becomes lively-- to
such an extent that we may even be afraid of it. The role of artistic skill in this process is undeniable (Freeberg, p. 45).

Freeberg recounts a wide range of rituals involved in creating icons used in many contemporary religions, all intended to breathe life into an inanimate object. In many instances the final act in bringing to life involves painting or carving in the eyes of the creation. For early believers in Islam, engaged as they were in a battle against the entrenched paganism of the Arabian peninsula, the animating force contained within figurative images must have been clearly understood. As Freeberg relates, "Aisha, the ten-year-old wife of the Prophet, was only allowed to play with dolls on condition that they did not resemble people" (Freeberg, p. 344). But the majority of modern Muslims see figurative art as human creations devoid of supernatural powers.

In addition to the imported or alien nature of icons encountered in the Arabian peninsula, Islam developed to the east of a long established and highly articulated visual culture, that of the Byzantine Empire. In such an environment, to quote Oleg Grabar (1987), followers of the new faith "[saw] images as one of the most dangerous weapons the Christians possessed… To a Muslim of the early eight century images were one of the most characteristic and in part hateful aspects of Christianity." (Grabar, p. 86) Grabar continued:

It is indeed very likely that the sophisticated Christian milieu of Jerusalem had tried to win to its faith the rather uncouth invaders. And it is a well-known fact that eastern Christianity had always liked to use the emotional impact of music and the visual arts to convert “barbarians.” That such attempts may have been effective with the Arabs is shown in the very interesting, although little studied, group of accounts dealing with the more or less legendary trips of Arabs to the Byzantine court in early Islamic times, or sometimes even before Islam. In most cases the “highlight” of the “guided tours” to which they submitted was a visit either to a church where a definite impact was made by the religious representations or to a court reception with similar results. In the pious accounts of later times the Muslim always leaves impressed but unpersuaded by the pageantry displayed. One may wonder, however, whether such was always the case and whether the later stories should be considered, at least in part, as moral stories intended to ward off defection. That the danger of defections existed is clearly implied. (Grabar, 1987, p. 61)

For reasons outlined above, in the first two centuries of Islam a complex set of rules and prohibitions developed around figuration. Figurative art continued to decorate the private homes of the aristocracy but disappeared from public places, replaced by decorative pattern-making based on floral or geometric themes. There developed a complex regulatory structure for the use of images. According to Grabar, although images were "permissible in hallways, floors, or baths, they were forbidden elsewhere; in some legal texts headless figures were allowed." (Grabar, 1987, p. 83)

In the two centuries following the death of Mohammad, the formative religion was further codified by the Hadith, or body of Traditions derived from the Prophet's close followers and from local stories assembled from conquered regions west and east of
Arabia. It is in the Hadith that the first clear pronouncements regarding figuration appear. This quote from the Hadith dates from the second half of the eight century A.D.:

Those who will be most severely punished on the Day of Judgment are the murderer of a Prophet, one who has been put to death by a Prophet, one who leads men astray without knowledge, and a maker of images or pictures. (Grabar, 1987, p. 82)

Despite the prohibitions against the making of figurative images by Muslims, there is evidence that images important to other religions were allowed and were often admired. As King writes:

The silence of the Christian and Islamic sources suggests that no long-sustained and total repression of Christian images ever took place in the early Islamic period to match in effectiveness the suppression of pagan idols in Arabia carried out by the Prophet. Where objections were expressed to Christian practices regarding images, they related to matters of doctrine raised by specific pictures, most frequently concerning the role of Jesus in Christianity.

In its religious and political guises, the crucifix was more objectionable to the Muslims than any picture, and its suppression is encountered in the Umayyad period more often than the destruction of pictures. (King, 1985, p. 268)

In Western thought the approach to images and image-making has taken several forms. Freeburg addresses "Plato's suspicion and denigration of materiality" as a sometimes dangerous distraction from contemplation of the true and the divine. On the other hand, Plato considered that visual art can result in a closer approximation of the divine than that afforded by ordinary experience. Freeberg addresses the ongoing tension in Western thinking about images in relation to the divine:

One argument against images, already found in the Pre-Socratics, recurs in every period of Christian history, and particularly in the context of iconoclasm. This is the argument that the divine, being unmaterial and uncircumscribable, cannot be represented in material and circumscribable form... Associated with the denigration of the senses that lies behind such arguments is an ethical and moral equation, between purity and virtue on the one hand and the absence of images (and not merely images of the gods) on the other. (Freeberg, p 61)

In some periods of Christian history the iconoclast impulse was dominant. Early Christian churches rarely contained direct representations or icons, although the cross was a common symbol. Figurative images in both two- and three-dimensional form gradually became more common in religious settings through the first millennium of Christianity.
In the two centuries after the founding of Islam the Byzantine Church experienced episodes of violent iconoclasm. During the reign of Leo III (Leo the Isaurian) icons within churches were prohibited during the "First Iconoclasm" between 726 and 787 A.D. During this period images, particularly those that were objects of veneration in their own right, were removed from churches and usually destroyed, sometimes to be replaced with the more symbolic cross. It is not clear whether the impetus for this first round of iconoclasm was initiated by the emperor acting without consultation with church officials, or whether it was the result of a growing sense of unease regarding the empire itself. Brubaker describes the low state of morale within the Byzantine Empire at the time:

The seventh century was not a happy period for the east Roman empire. Its first quarter was occupied with Persian and Avar invasions, culminating in the siege of Constantinople of 626, when a relic-icon of Christ was famously credited with saving the city. With the battle of the Yarmuk in 636, the Arab conquests began seriously to affect the empire; within the next decade, Byzantium lost its richest province, Egypt. By 650, Byzantium was halved in size, had lost its major agricultural base and, with few financial or military resources in reserve and its infrastructure severely shaken, was presumably low in morale. (Brubaker, 2009, p. 39)

It was in this context that the First Byzantine Iconoclasm took place. The Second Council of Nicaea which included delegates from both the Roman and Byzantine churches, resolved the matter in 787 A.D, with a declaration of faith condoning the use of images in churches. The use of icons was restored at least for a century.

The events surrounding this bout of Byzantine iconoclasm illustrate the range of influences that surround similar instances of iconoclasm across religions. Such instances have historically involved a mix of geopolitics, economics, and cultural factors, in addition to issues of theology.

Dazzling though they were, the highly developed visual arts of the Byzantine Church were proving no match for the forces of Islam, who had by this time removed the figurative arts from their public places. By the end of the ninth century the visual branding of Islam was nearly complete; figuration had been removed from coinage, from places of worship, and from religious and official buildings, replaced with geometric and botanical patterns that were by now recognizable as Islamic art.

Figurative art was still practiced but was created for the aristocracy and kept away from public view. Some of these private works included images of the Prophet Mohammad and pictures events from the Koran. Grabar notes references to images of Mohammad, Jesus and other Old Testament prophets dating to the Prophet's lifetime. (Grabar, 2003, p. 19)
According to Ali (1999, p. 2), the earliest still extant images of Mohammad appear in Persia during the Ilkhanid dynasty founded by descendants of Genghis Khan (d. 1227 A.D.). The Ilkhanids took an eclectic approach to religions in the early years and brought with them the arts of painting and manuscript illustration from central Asia.

Ilkhanid leader Manmud Ghazan Khan in Tabriz commissioned Rashid Al-Din to produce the *Jami’ al-Tawarikh* (A Compendium of Chronicles), a history of the Mongol tribes and their exploits. An Arabic version of *Jami’ al-Tawarikh* dated 1307 in the University of Edinburgh Library contains a painting of Mohammad replacing the black stone in the Ka’bah. Other versions of the book include other likenesses, including The Prophet exhorting his family before the battle of Badr, The Prophet leading Hamza and the Muslims into battle, and The Prophet receiving the submission of the Banu ’l-Nadir.

In these paintings Mohammad is stylistically distinguished from other figures by braids of hair that fall across both shoulders and by his location in the compositions. It appears that the images were not meant to be icons but rather straightforward illustrations of recorded events. The distinction is an important one and is one that has been made at several periods in the West as well. While the illustration of historical events might serve to enhance the understanding of the untutored and the illiterate believer, when the image becomes an object of veneration in and of itself it becomes a distraction from pure faith.
Later images of Mohammad from the Timurid era (1370-1506 A.D.) include stylistic elements that further distinguish the Prophet from others, by positioning him in a more completely separate space in the composition, and by adding an aura or halo. Over the next centuries pictures containing images of Mohammad became less realistic and more stylized, and the gilt halo was gradually replaced by completely covering the Prophet's facial features with veil.

Figure 5. Newly-born Mohammed in his mother’s arms, shown to his grandfather and a group of Meccans, A.D. 1368. Topkapi Museum, Istanbul.
According to Ali, Mohammad was never again depicted with an open face after the 16th century (Ali, 1999, p. 7). A number of visual devices were used to veil or hide the face of Mohammad including simply depicting the Prophet's halo as a symbol for the figure itself as in figure XX, painted in 1821 A.D. during the Mughal empire.

In these later years it was not uncommon for Muslim rulers to commission art which contained images of the Prophet for their private collections and for public display. (Leaman, 2014, p. 191) Where such images still exist today, it is no longer common for them to be put on public display, for fear of offending sensibilities. In Ottoman paintings of Mohammad the face is veiled but the figure is stylistically similar to other figures in the images.

Figure 6. Siyer-i Nebi (the life of the Prophet), Mohammed at the Ka'bah, Turkish, A.D. 1595. Topkapi Museum, Istanbul.
Images of Mohammad are rare after the sixteenth century although copies of earlier works continued to be produced through the nineteenth century.

Figure 7. Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad into Heaven, Leaf from Yusuf and Zulaykha, Mughal Dynasty, A.D. 18th century. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.
Images of Mohammad appear in the West from the middle ages into the twentieth century. In many cases such images were made for propagandist purposes, most often to depict the superiority of Christianity over Islam.


One such image appears in a Portuguese Book of Hours printed in 1500, showing Mohammad held down beneath the foot of Mary. The same page contains an image of a Jew similarly downtrodden, thus visually establishing the dominion of Christianity over the two competing religions of the book. This visual motif has been repeated through the centuries, and is recreated in three dimensional form in a late 17th century pulpit sculpted by Mattheus van Beveren for the Church of Our Lady of Dendermonde in Flanders.

Such images form the artistic antecedents for more directly bombastic and purposely offensive images of Islam and Judaism that came later, including recent cartoons coming from Europe and the Middle East.
A wave of iconoclasm swept across northern Europe during the Protestant Reformation during the sixteenth century. Sometimes referred to as the Beeldenstorm (Dutch) or Bildersturm (German), the impetus was provided by a renewed emphasis on the prohibition against idolatry in the Old Testament, combined with anti-Catholic sentiment in northern Europe. John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli were among the leading advocates of the movement. In many instances the controversy had a class-based character, with craftsmen and trade workers agitating for destruction, while town council members, more likely to be members of the wealthier and more effected congregations, often mounted a rear guard action to mitigate the effects of the movement.

Christensen (1977) quotes a list of grievances presented to the Magistrates of Strasbourg in 1525, which includes the following:

It also troubles us, since no scriptures say it is right, that there is that evil idol in the choir of the cathedral, which is not only a blasphemous offence to many of our people in the city, but to all people in the whole region. For every day one sees people kneeling before it, and praying to it, while these same people obstinately refuse to pay attention to God's Word as it is preached to them. And the silver idol behind the altar in the choir is also evil, and the idols in the entrance to the cathedral, which were recently made into rubble, and now, more than ever, people light candles in front of them during the day, which is a travesty against God and pious customs. In sum we see all images as evil, for they appeal not to the perfected Christians but to the weak and those whom the Word has not yet possessed. All idols are against the Word of God, and no good fruit can come from them (p. 113).
The iconoclast movement in Protestant Europe often led to uncontrolled riots and loss of life. In Catholic churches especially, religious objects were taken out and destroyed indiscriminately. Christensen describes the scene in Basel after the iconoclast riots of February 9, 1529:

The next morning Basel looked out upon a scene that, according to one chronicler, resembled a battlefield after a war. The images lay everywhere in and about the churches, some with heads missing, others with hands, arms, or legs lopped off. There remained little that the authorities could do beyond attempting to legitimize and regularize what had already transpired. City workmen were dispatched to the cathedral and other churches, where they systematically removed and demolished all the remaining cult objects overlooked by the iconoclastic mob, and whitewashed the walls. Erasmus, at this point still resident in Basel, later complained to a correspondent that neither costliness nor artistic worth had availed to save anything at all. At first an attempt was made to provide the poor with fire wood from the debris of the destroyed art works. When this led to tumultuous and unseemly strife over the spoils, it was decided that the flammable portion of the rubble might better be heaped up and immediately incinerated in an orderly manner by the city work crews. Large numbers of these piles, perhaps as many as a dozen at the Munster alone, were ignited and burned in the courtyards of the various churches on this February 10th, which by strange coincidence was Ash Wednesday. According to contemporary observers, the pyres burned for two days and nights (Christensen, 1977, p. 128).

![Figure 10. Jan Luyken, Beeldenstorm, 1566 A.D., engraving. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.](image-url)

Conflicts between Christian sects continued well into the twentieth century. The history of American illustration contains many examples of sectarian imagery including this Thomas Nast cartoon from 1871.
The cartoon is clearly anti-Catholic. In addition, Nast's cartoon reflects contemporary anxieties about immigration, especially from Ireland, and the contemporary movement to establish publicly funded parochial schools, an initiative supported by William "Boss" Tweed who appears at the top of the cartoon, overseeing the sacrifice of Protestant children to the Catholics.

Similar images are common in the Arab press and contain a similar mix of religious, social and political messages. This series of cartoons that appeared in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Anba’a Al-Duwaliya* illustrate the range of religious and political issues commonly targeted in the modern Arab press. The series takes aim at America and the American Secretary of State at the time (an added bonus is that she is a woman), Pope Benedict, the state of Israel and, by extension, Jews and Christians. Such images continue to be part of the ongoing toxic mix of religious, social and political image-making that continues to be part the conversation between east and west today.
Conclusion

Since I began teaching drawing and illustration in Arabia I have witnessed students struggle with making images, especially images of the human figure and face. Often students who excel at drawing inanimate objects and architecture appear to be visually "struck dumb" when it comes to drawing the human figure. It appears that students hesitate to draw subject matter that has over the centuries come to be understood as haram (forbidden), at least in the cultural imagination. This remains the situation even with students who are exposed to countless images of people through photographs, cinema, and social media.

The photo-based art of Saudi artist Jawhara bin Saud directly addresses the forbidden nature of representing the human face, although her art does not clearly answer the question of why this is so.

*Figure 12. Jowhara Al Saud (Saudi), Halos, 2008, ink drawing from photo*

It is clear that the Charlie Hebdo killings were about much more than image making and representations of the Prophet. Images such as those from *Charlie Hebdo* and *Al-Anba’a Al-Duwaliya* continue to stir reaction because images continue to elicit powerful responses in those who see them, for a wide range of reasons; political, economic, cultural, and religious. In order to understand the impulse to create and break images it is useful to keep in mind the larger contexts in which images are created and destroyed.
References


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