

The Power of Wood and Stone; The Taliban Is Not the First to Fear the Mysterious Lure of Art

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The demolition of the two colossal Buddhas of Bamian, Afghanistan, is chilling in its ferocity. The artistic value and the scale of these great carvings -- and our awareness that there are no other images like them anywhere, bearing witness to the early practice of one of the world's major religions -- evokes horror and indignation at their destruction.

Equally shocking to many is the manner in which Afghanistan's Taliban leaders shrug off the world's distress. "All we are breaking are stones," said Mullah Muhammad Omar of the attack on the colossi. His minister of culture, Mawlawi Qudratullah Jamal, echoed him: "It is not a big issue. The statues are objects only made of mud and stone." Yet these statements reveal a central paradox not only of the Taliban's actions, but of iconoclasm throughout history: If paintings and sculptures are simply pieces of wood and stone, inert and insignificant, why bother to destroy them?

The very act of iconoclasm testifies to the mysterious -- and often threatening -- power images can hold over us. In ravaging their country's artistic heritage in the name of fundamentalist Islam, the Taliban rulers reveal not their strength, but their fear. In this, they take their place in a long line of despots and others who have trembled in the sight of creations they did not understand, creations that seemed somehow to embody a life and to emanate an inexplicable and ominous force of their own.

Iconoclasm is generally a response to the discomfort elicited by such images. One can argue that there are two basic kinds of iconoclasm. In the first, images are destroyed because they are invested with the powers of those whom they represent -- God, Christ, the saints -- and the authorities worry that ordinary people expect too much of them, or even worship them. In cases such as the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century, or the extraordinary wave of iconoclasm that followed upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989 and '90, images are taken down and smashed because they are symbols of a hated or repressive order that has been overthrown.

The Taliban's iconoclasm is of the first kind. Omar's pronouncements that the statues were "false idols" and representations of "gods of the infidels" have an eerie familiarity. These phrases possess a rich and long history -- and not only in Islamic tradition. The second verse of the Ten Commandments of the Judeo-Christian tradition declares: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." It is followed immediately by the phrase, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image," which establishes the most famous and most fundamental restriction on the making of images and art.

At the basis of every edict against idolatry lies exactly this connection between false gods and material images, and the fear that as soon as you make an image, you are bound to worship it, and therefore to worship something false and illusory. This fear has led to the sort of wholesale

destruction of sacred art that occurred in the Byzantine iconoclasm of the 8th and 9th centuries and during the Reformation, when Martin Luther wrote constantly of the "false idols" of the Roman church, and "Against the Pagan Idols" was the title of many a sermon by Lutherans and Calvinists of the period.

Many of these iconoclasts argued that since God is divine and uncircumscribable, how can he be represented in material and circumscribed form at all? How can the divine be shown as a person of the kind we all know? Similarly, the earliest followers of Buddha doubted that he should be represented in human form; better to concentrate on nothingness, they felt, than on the represented forms of the body.

If reverence must be paid to an image of God, the opponents of sacred art declared, then better it be paid to the living embodiment of him. In 12th-century France, Saint Bernard roundly condemned the use of certain kinds of holy images in churches -- paintings, sculptures, even mosaics -- and suggested they be removed. Was it not better, he asked, to spend money on the poor, who were after all the living images of God, rather than on dead ones? The Taliban recently offered an echo of this argument, expressing anger that the United Nations and Western governments were willing to spend money on the Buddhas, rather than helping starving Afghani children. "If money is going to statues while children are dying of malnutrition next door, then that makes it harmful, and we destroy it," a Taliban envoy said on a visit to the United States.

But to say that the destruction of the "idols" of Afghanistan can be inserted into a recurrent dimension of human history is to tell only half the story. There is something much more fundamental at play in human reactions to art. The truth is that art can inspire ambivalence, that there is something about images that arouses both admiration and hostility, desire and revulsion - - and that it was as much this truth as Islamic edict that may have guided the hand of the Taliban and makes our own responses to their actions so very strong.

Images are feared not because they are dead, but because they seem to be, and are often believed to be, alive. Since time immemorial, people have responded to images as if they were real, as if they somehow partook of the life of what they represent. They are said to move, they seem to speak, they arouse desire. All cultures show concern about the sensuality of images that look as if they are living beings (although the phrase "it almost seems alive" is often applied not just to naturalistic imagery, but also to images that have strong vitality of line, or vibrant colors). Aisha, the 9-year-old wife of the Prophet Muhammad, for example, was only allowed to play with dolls on the condition that they did not resemble people.

And certainly this belief in the "life" of images is at the root of the miracle-working powers attributed to countless sculptures and paintings all over the Catholic world. Like the Taliban, Luther, too, insisted that paintings and sculptures are just "pieces of wood and stone." An image of Saint Anthony, or the Virgin, or even of Christ, was just inert material. Saint Anthony himself, like Christ and the Virgin, might well have been capable of the miracles attributed to him; but this was certainly not true of the many and varied images of him, Luther and others repeatedly insisted.

Art lovers speak of the "divine powers" of the artist, but the notion that an artist can create like God is at bottom a dangerous one. There is a notable reformulation of the idea that artistic images are somehow blasphemous in the Islamic Hadith -- the retellings of the Prophet Muhammad's sayings. One addresses the subject of the artist. Since only God has the power to give life to form, it says, the artist's presumption in attempting to emulate him must be punished. When, therefore, the artist finally reaches heaven, God challenges him to breathe life into his creation. When the artist fails to do so, he is cast into hell to be tormented.

It is not an accident that during the Roman Empire it was asserted that "where the image is, there, too, is the emperor." All the respect due to the emperor was due to images of him as well. By the light of this interpretation, it is no wonder the Byzantine iconoclasts felt that images of the emperor, at least, had to be destroyed. If you could destroy or damage his image, you somehow also impugned and mitigated his power. We see this same thinking in other instances where those who have a grudge against the representatives of a regime assault their images -- whether of Lenin, or the Shah of Iran, or even Princess Diana, whose portrait in London's National Gallery was slashed by an IRA sympathizer in 1981.

And there is a direct line here from official doctrine to psychopathic behavior. Disturbed individuals often attack images precisely because they believe that by destroying an image, or by damaging a part of it, they can do away with its powers, with its strange grip on its beholders, with its sensuality. This was the case in the 1972 attack on Michelangelo's famous Piet (an image in which the borderline between the sacred and the sensual has often appeared quite thin), or Velazquez's Rokeby Venus, defaced in 1914, and countless other examples. Often the parts destroyed are the eyes, the prime indicators of life in a body, followed by the mouth, the nose, and finally the limbs (as a general, though certainly not universal, rule).

In this light, could it be that the mullahs were not merely blasting away idols of the infidels, but that they feared a real possibility -- that the peasants living in the valley of Bamian might be so impressed by the size, and the beauty, of those 120- and 175- foot high statues that they might see them as gods, that they might begin worshiping Buddha himself because of the statues there?

This may seem a preposterous idea; but it is surely the kinship -- not the difference -- between such primitive notions and our own susceptibilities to art that is the source of at least part of our shock at what happened in that remote and beautiful valley. But it could be said that there is another reason as well.

In blasting and hacking away the giant Buddhas, the Taliban's leaders have shown the same responses that drive their rule of the people of Afghanistan. They have shown themselves to be menaced both by the inexplicable sensuality of art and by its multifold attractions -- attractions that have for centuries been held, in both East and West, to be as wanton and as little subject to reason as the attractions of women. To the Taliban, presumably, the powers of art, like the powers of women, are frightening because they cannot be controlled, unless you blast the face off a statue or cover the face of a woman with a burkha.

Now it will become as difficult to see the face of a statue in Afghanistan as it is to see the face of a woman. And the suffering will go on.