

Iconoclasm and the Islamic State
Dr. James Noyes

Primer I: Theology

• ***As a starting point, what is the theological basis for iconoclasm in Islam?***

Put simply, the theological basis for iconoclasm in Islam stems from the same scriptural premise against the worship of idols shared by Christians and Jews: the story of the golden calf.

The Bible describes the Jews being led by Moses out of slavery in Egypt towards the Promised Land. During this journey, Moses receives the commandment against “graven images”—that is, making or bowing down to “any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” While Moses receives the commandment, however, the Israelites are described as worshipping a golden statue of a calf. This calf is generally assumed to be Apis, an Egyptian god associated with fertility and the protection of the dead. Thus the Israelite worship of the Egyptian idol signifies not only their disobedience of the commandment over graven images, but also a return to the religious practices of their oppressors.

The same story exists in the Quran. While Moses (Musa) is described as giving “clear proof” of God’s Covenant, the Israelites “worshipped the calf” because they were “wrong-doers.” Indeed, the notion of “One God”—*al-Lah*—is central not only to the theology of the image for Muslims but to Islam itself, and is connected to the First Pillar of Islam, the *shahada*, which states that “there is no god but one God, and Muhammad is his messenger.”

In this context, the Quran uses the Arabic word *shirk*. Strictly speaking, this word translates as “association”—that is, the sin of associating the created thing with the Creator—but is more popularly used to describe “idolatry.” *Shirk* is the absence of *tawhid*—that is, the absolute monotheism of worshipping the One God. The scripture connects “those who disbelieve [*kufur*] among the people of the Book” with *shirk* and asserts that “Ibrahim was a true Muslim and he was not of *al-mushrikun*” (those who commit *shirk*). Thus the Jews and Christians are understood to have broken the Abrahamic Covenant because of their *shirk*, while Muslims fulfill the “true religion” of the One God.

Needless to say, this position has been the source of significant debate, not least because the Jews and Christians themselves forbid idolatry, because iconoclasm has been committed by Christians from the eighth-century Byzantines to the sixteenth-century Protestants, and because certain strands of Islam—notably the Shia—have iconographic traditions of their martyrs. Nevertheless, it remains the theological basis for much of the Sunni iconoclasm we are seeing in Syria and Iraq today.