

John Jewel,
“Homily Against the Peril of Idolatry
and Superfluous Decking of Churches”
(London, 1571)

INTRODUCTION

The Elizabethan book of homilies was written in the early 1560s, in order to provide parish ministers around England a collection of sermons to serve as a guide for preaching. As leading English Protestants returned from exile after the reign of Queen Mary, the homilies became one of several efforts that the newly elected Protestant bishops made to bring a certain amount of uniformity and continuity to the various liturgical practices in Elizabethan England. Eventually, the name of John Jewel (c.1522–71), the Bishop of Salisbury, became attached to the 1571 printing of the homilies; however, the first editions have no stated author, and the original authorship remains in dispute.¹

For our purposes, the book of homilies, and more specifically the “Homily Against the Peril of Idolatry,” has two major elements that highlight aspects of the image debate. First, the homilies were part of a growing tension between Elizabeth and her newly minted bishops, particularly those

1. The complete edition of the Elizabethan homilies was last edited in Griffiths, ed., *Two Books of Homilies*. Griffiths argued for Jewel as the author (Griffiths, xxxii). Although, Aston makes a strong case for Edmund Grindal, Elizabeth’s future archbishop (Aston, *England’s Iconoclasts*, 322n.96).

of a more reformed temperament. Elizabeth argued with her bishops over the extent to which reforms should be carried out. Patrick Collinson has demonstrated that the homilies became a lightning rod for this larger dispute, in which the Calvinist tendencies of many of the English clergy came into contention with the will of the monarch.² Comparisons of earlier and later manuscripts of the homilies have revealed a marked shift away from virulent iconoclastic language, limiting the destruction to abused images. It is likely that these changes were made at the Queen's behest.³ Part of the Queen's reticence certainly had to do with her own demonstrated proclivity toward certain religious images, like her own chapel cross.⁴

A second key aspect in the homily against idolatry is the nature of the documents as a guide for preachers and other clergy. Unlike many of the theological treatises and polemical tomes found in *From Icons to Idols*, the homilies were intended to buttress the low level of education found among many parish preachers. They were directed at an audience that were not likely to have read much theology, and so the homily against idolatry was something of a commonplace of Protestant arguments, a compilation of what had already been said. It serves modern scholarship as a lowest common denominator, a statement on what English Protestants believed that every minister of the gospel should know.

The "Homily Against the Peril of Idolatry" is divided into three parts, which all together equal over twenty thousand words, the longest of all the homilies. The selections here, from all three parts, are intended to demonstrate the style of the author and what matters were seen to be of primary importance. The first homily deals with the church fathers and draws on a host of sources—including Tertullian, Clement, Origen, Athanasius, Lactantius, Epiphanius, Cyril of Alexandria, Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, and Eusebius—in demonstrating the patristic condemnation of idols. The second part follows the historical argument, charting how idolatry crept into the churches. Here, the writer reaches a fever pitch of polemic asserting that Christian idolatry has brought about the division of the Church into East and West, "the utter overthrow of the Christian religion" in Greece to "Muhammad's false religion," and "the cruel dominion and tyranny of the Saracens and Turks." Perhaps most importantly for the history of the image debate, the homilies assert two key moments in church history as the

2. Patrick Collinson demonstrated that the first major split between Elizabeth and her bishops came during the 1563 Convocation, over the language of the homilies: Collinson, *Elizabethans*, 113–14. For a more detailed examination of them in the context of images, see Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 320–24.

3. Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 321–2; Haugaard, *Elizabeth*, 273–76.

4. Aston, *The King's Bedpost*, 101–7.

beginning of institutionalized idolatry (echoing earlier reformers like John Calvin, document 5): Pope Gregory the Great's letter to Serenus in which Gregory allows images to remain in the churches and the Second Council of Nicea, which opposed the iconoclasm in the Byzantine Church.⁵ Finally, the third part argues that the practices of the Catholic church concerning images are "all one which the Gentile idolaters used."

TEXT

First Homily⁶

In what points the true ornaments of the church or temple of God consist and stand have been declared in the two last homilies, entreating of the right use of the temple or house of God and of the due reverence that all true Christian people are bound to give unto the same. The sum whereof is that the church or house of God is a place appointed by the Holy Scriptures, where the lively Word of God ought to be read, taught, and heard; the Lord's holy name called upon by public prayer, hearty thanks given to his majesty for his infinite and unspeakable benefits bestowed upon us, his holy sacraments duly and reverently ministered, and that therefore all that be godly indeed, ought both with diligence at times appointed to repair together to the said Church and there with all reverence to use and behave themselves before the Lord. And that the said Church thus godly used by the servants of the Lord in the Lord's true service for the effectual presence of God's grace, wherewith he does by his Holy Word and promises endow his people there present and assembled to the attainment as well of worldly commodities necessary for us, as also of all heavenly gifts, and life everlasting. It is called by the Word of God (as it is indeed) the temple of the Lord, and the house of God, and that therefore the due reverence thereof, is stirred up in the hearts of the godly, by the consideration of these true ornaments of the said house of God, and not by any outward ceremonies, or costly and glorious decking of the said house or temple of the Lord, contrary to the most manifest doctrine of the scriptures, and contrary to the usage of the primitive church, which was most pure and uncorrupt. And contrary to the sentences and judgments of the most ancient learned and godly doctors of the church (as

5. The Seventh Synod, or the Second Council of Nicea (787), was a key "target" in the Protestant debates: Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 55. John Jewel, in his debates with Catholic apologists, wrote: "There was never any assembly of Christian bishops so vain, so peevish, so wicked, so blasphemous." (Jewel, *Works*, IV.792).

6. Jewel, "Homily Against the Peril of Idolatry," 25–26.

hereafter shall appear) the corruption of these latter days has brought into the church an infinite multitude of images . . . decked with gold and silver, painted with colors, set them with stone and pearl, clothed them with silks and precious vestures, fantasizing untruly that to be the chief decking and adorning of the temple or house of God, and that all people should be the more moved to the due reverence of the same if all corners thereof were glorious and glittering with gold and precious stones.

Second Homily⁷

Hear you see what Christian princes of most ancient times decreed against images which then began to creep in among the Christians. For it is certain that by the space of three hundred years and more after the death of our Savior Christ and before these godly emperors' reign, there were no images publicly in churches or temples.⁸ How would the idolaters glory if they had so much antiquity and authority for them, as is here against them? Now shortly after these days, the Goths, the Vandals, Huns, and other barbarians and wicked nations burst into Italy and all parts of west countries of Europe, with huge and mighty armies, spoiled all places, destroyed cities, and burned libraries, so that learning and true religion went to wrack and decayed incredibly. And so the bishops of those latter days, being of less learning and in the middle of wars, taking less heed also than did the bishops before, by ignorance of God's Word and negligence of bishops, and especially barbarous princes, not rightly instructed in true religion, bearing the rule, images came into the Church of Christ in the said west parts, where these barbarous people ruled not now in painted clothes only but also embossed in stone, timber, metal, and other like matter, and were not only set up, but began to be worshipped also.

...

But of Gregory's opinion, thinking that images might be suffered in churches, so it was taught that they should not be worshipped: what ruin of religion and what mischief ensued afterward to all Christendom.⁹ . . . First, by schism rising between the East and the West Church about the said images. Next, by the division of the empire into two parts by the same occasion

7. Jewel, "Homily Against the Peril of Idolatry," 61–70.

8. The emperors referenced here are those that followed after Constantine the Great. This is something of a dead argument, because until Constantine, Christianity was not celebrated publicly, so it had no public places of worship *per se*.

9. Gregory the Great, "Epistle XIII," in NPNF, 2nd Series, vol. XIII, II.297–98.

of images, to the great weakening of all Christendom, whereby last of all has followed the utter overthrow of the Christian religion and noble empire in Greece and all the east parts of the world and the increase of Muhammad's false religion, and the cruel dominion and tyranny of the Saracens and Turks, who now hang over our necks also that dwell in the west parts of the world, ready at all occasions to overrun us. And all this we owe unto our idols and images, and our idolatry in worshipping them.

But now give your ear a little to the process of the history, wherein I do much follow the histories of Paulus Diaconus, and others, joined with Eutropius, an old writer.¹⁰ For though some of the authors were favorers of images, yet do they most plainly and at large prosecute the histories of those times, whom Baptist Platina also in his history of popes, and in the lives of Constantine, and Gregory II, bishops of Rome, and other places (where he entreats of this matter) chiefly follow.¹¹

After Gregory's time, Constantine, bishop of Rome, assembled a council of bishops in the western church, and did condemn Philippicus, then emperor, and John bishop of Constantinople for the heresy of the Monothelites, not without a cause, indeed but very justly.¹² When he had done so by the consent of the learned about him, Constantine, bishop of Rome, caused the images of the ancient fathers which had been at those six councils which were allowed and received of all men to be painted in the entry of St. Peter's Church at Rome. When the Greeks had knowledge hereof, they began to dispute and reason the matter of images with the Latins, and held this opinion, that images could have no place in Christ's Church, and the Latins held the contrary and took part with the images. So the eastern and western churches which agreed evil before, upon this contention about images fell to utter enmity, which was never well reconciled yet. But in the mean season, Emperors Philippicus and Arthemius, or Anastasius, commanded images and pictures to be pulled down and raised out in every place of their dominion.¹³ After them came Theodosius III. He commanded the defaced images to be painted again in their places, but this Theodosius reigned but one year. Leo III succeeded him, who was a Syrian born, a very wise, godly,

10. Paul the Deacon, *History*; Eutropius, *Abridgment*.

11. The first complete translation of Platina's history is underway. The first volume is Platina, *Lives of the Popes*.

12. Ekonomou, *Byzantine Rome*, 245–47.

13. This is a reference to the first iconoclastic period of the Orthodox Church. For further reading see Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium*. Aston explains that the Byzantine precedent was vital to the Protestant attack on images, but it was also problematic, particularly the dubious source text known as the *Libri Carolini* (Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 47–61).

merciful, and valiant prince. This Leo by proclamation commanded that all images set up in churches to be worshipped, should be plucked down and defaced, and required especially the bishop of Rome that he should do the same, and himself, in the mean season, caused all images that were in the imperial city Constantinople to be gathered on a heap in the midst of the city, and there publicly burned them to ashes and whited over and raised out all pictures painted upon the walls of the temples and punished sharply diverse maintainers of images.¹⁴

...

Now on the contrary, note you that the bishops of Rome were no ordinary magistrates appointed by God out of their diocese, but usurpers of princes' authority, contrary to God's Word, and stirrers up of sedition and rebellion and workers of continual treason against their sovereign lords, contrary to God's law and the ordinances of all human laws, being not only enemies to God, but also rebels and traitors against their princes.

Third Homily¹⁵

Now remains the third part, that their rites and ceremonies in honoring and worshipping of the images and saints are all one with the rites which the Gentile idolaters used in honoring their idols. First, what means it that Christians after the example of the Gentile idolaters go on pilgrimage to visit images, where they have the like at home but that they have a more opinion of holiness and virtue in some images than some others, like the Gentile idolaters had? Which is the readiest way to bring them to idolatry by worshipping of them and directly against God's word, who says, "Seek me and you shall live and do not seek Bethel, neither enter not into Gilgal, neither go to Beersheba."¹⁶ And against such as had any superstition in the holiness of the place, as though they should be heard for the places' sake, saying, "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain," and you say that at Jerusalem is the place where men should worship. Our savior Christ pronounces, "Believe me, the hour comes when you shall worship the father neither in this mountain nor at Jerusalem, but true worshippers shall worship the father in spirit and truth."¹⁷ But it is too well known that by such pilgrimage going,

14. The most recent research questions the existence of any such edict from Leo III: Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium*, 151.

15. Jewel, "Homily Against the Peril of Idolatry," 103–21.

16. Amos 5:5.

17. John 4:20–21.

Lady Venus and her son Cupid were rather worshipped wantonly in the flesh than God the Father and our Savior Christ his Son, truly worshipped in the spirit.¹⁸

And it was very agreeable (as St. Paul teaches) that they which fell into idolatry, which is spiritual fornication, should also fall into carnal fornication and all uncleanness by the just judgments of God, delivering them over to abominable concupiscence.

What does it mean that Christian men, after the use of the Gentile idolaters, cap and kneel before images? Which, if they had any sense and gratitude, would kneel before men: carpenters, masons, plasterers, founders, and goldsmiths, their makers and framers whose means they have attained this honor, which else should have been evil favored and rude lumps of clay or plaster, pieces of timber, stone, or metal, without shape or fashion, and so without all estimation and honor, as that idol in the pagan poet confesses saying, “I was once a vile block, but now I am become a god, etc.”¹⁹ What a fond thing is it for man, who has life and reason, to bow himself to a dead and insensible image, the work of his own hand? Is not this stooping and kneeling before them, adoration of them, which is forbidden so earnestly by God’s word? Let such as so fall down before images of saints, know and confess that they exhibit that honor to dead stocks and stone, which the saints themselves—Peter, Paul, and Barnabas—would not to be given them being alive, which the angel of God forbid to be given to him.²⁰ And if they say they exhibit such honor not to the image but to the saint whom it represents, they are convicted of folly to believe that they please saints with that honor, which they abhor as a spoil of God’s honor. For they be no changelings, but now both having greater understanding and more fervent love of God more abhor to deprive him of his due honor, and being now like unto the angels of God, with angels flee to take unto them by sacrilege the honor due to God.²¹ And here withal is confuted their lewd distinction of *latria* and *dulia*, where it is evident that the saints of God cannot abide that as much as any outward worshipping be done or exhibited to them. But Satan, God’s enemy, desiring to rob God of his honor desires exceedingly that such honor might be given to him. Wherefore, those which give the honor due to the Creator to any

18. This sort of interlacing of paganism and Christian worship was a popular criticism that reformers levelled at Catholic practices. In the sixteenth century, the accusation was popularized in Erasmus’s colloquy “The Shipwreck” in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, 351–67.

19. Likely a poor translation of Horace, “Satire VIII” in Horace, *Satires, Epistles, Ars Poetica*.

20. Rev 19:10.

21. Rev 19:10.

creature does service acceptable to no saints (who be the friends of God) but unto Satan. . . . And to attribute such desire of divine honor to saints is to blot them with a most odious and devilish ignominy and villainy and indeed of saints to make them satans and very devils, whose property is to challenge to themselves the honor which is due to God only.

...

Now images will continually, to the beholders, preach their doctrine, that is the worshipping of images and idolatry, to which . . . mankind is exceedingly prone and inclined to give ear and credit, as experience of all nations and ages too much proves. But a true preacher to stay this mischief is in very many places scarcely heard once in a whole year and somewhere not once in seven years, as is evident to be proved. And that evil opinion which has been long rooted in men's hearts cannot suddenly by one sermon be rooted out. And as few are inclined to credit sound doctrine, as many and almost all be prone to superstition and idolatry. So that herein appears not only a difficulty but also an impossibility of the remedy.²²

Further it appears not by any story of credit that true and sincere preaching has endured in any one place above one hundred years. But it is evident that images, superstition, and worshipping of images and idolatry have continued many hundreds of years. For all writings and experience testify that good things do by little and little ever decay, until they be clean banished and contrariwise, evil things do more and more increase, until they come to a full perfection of wickedness. . . . For preaching of God's word (most sincere in the beginning) by the process of time waxed less and less pure . . . and other inventions of men crept in place of it. And on the other part, images among Christian men were first painted and that in whole stories together, which had some signification in them. Afterwards, they were embossed and made of timber, stone, plaster, and metal. And first they were only kept privately in private men's houses. And then after, they crept into churches and temples, but first by painting and after by embossing. And yet were they nowhere at the first worshipped. But shortly after, they began to be worshipped of the ignorant sort of men, as appears by the epistle that Gregory I, Bishop of Rome, wrote to Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles. Of the which two bishops, Serenus for idolatry committed to images, braked them and burned them; Gregory although he thought it tolerable to let them stand, yet he judged it abominable that they should be

22. A similar argument was made by Martin Luther against Andreas Karlstadt, over the role and place of images in worship: "Against the Heavenly Prophets," in *Luther's Works*, LI.81–100

worshipped and thought (as is now alleged) that the worshipping of them might be stayed by teaching of God's Word, according as he exhorts Serenus to teach the people, as in the same epistle appears.²³ . . . For notwithstanding Gregory's writing, and the preaching of others, images being once publicly set up in temples and churches, simple men and women shortly after fell on heaps to worshipping of them. And at the last, the learned also were carried away with the public error, as with a violent stream or flood. And at the Second Council of Nicea, the bishops and clergy decreed, that images should be worshipped and so by occasion of these stumbling blocks, not only the unlearned and simple, but the learned and wise, not the people only, but the bishops, not the sheep, but also the shepherds themselves (who should have been guides in the right way, and light to shine in darkness) being blinded by the bewitching of images, as blind guides of the blind, fell both into the pit of damnable idolatry.²⁴

23. Gregory the Great, "Epistle XIII," in NPNE, 2nd Series, vol. XIII, II.297-98.

24. Percival, ed., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, in NPNE, 2nd Series, vol. XIV, 549-51.