**Intro**

One of the key elements that Islam and Christianity share is that they are aniconic. This means that prohibitions against visual representation, particularly representation of the divine, are central to their sacred texts. [Exodus slide.] Of course how this plays out in practice is messy. [subsequent slides]

I’m making two basic arguments in this lecture:

1) Christians have made images since the founding of the religion
2) Representations of Christ and his martyrdom are central to the tradition, but they come late in the game; other images are more prevalent in early Christian images

But first, a quick detour into . . .

**A slew of empires**

[explain AD CE]

[map slides]

*Roman empire*—510BCE to 530CE

This is the period we’re going to cover today

Armstrong will cover the period from roughly 800-1400, the time of empires (Holy Roman Empire and Byzantine Empire) and the Crusades


*Byzantine Empire*—roughly 330CE-1453CE

The Byzantine Empire was the predominantly Greek-speaking continuation of the eastern half of the Roman Empire during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

*Holy Roman empire*—962-1806CE

The Holy Roman Empire was a multi-ethnic complex of territories in central Europe during the medieval and early modern periods until its dissolution in 1806.

*Ottoman empire*—1299-1923CE

by Oghuz Turks under Osman Bey in north-western Anatolia in 1299. With the conquest of Constantinople by Mehmed II in 1453, the Ottoman state was transformed into an empire

Most of the Christian martyr stories we will cover in the second half of the program are from 1400-1600; a period of relatively intense internecine conflict in which Christians killed other Christians. These fill in the gap between the Crusades and Armstrong’s contemporary history of the Middle East.

**Martyrdom**
Martyr
Martyrion (G) = witness

Saint
Sanctus (L) = devoted, consecrated

Martyrdom was a crucial element of the early Christian experience under the Roman empire. Christians were persecuted for their faith by being literally “thrown to the lions” in the amphitheaters. This went on until Christianity was legalized by the Emperors Constantine the Great and Licinius. Christians were persecuted by local authorities on a sporadic and ad-hoc basis, often more according to the whims of individual communities than to the opinion of imperial authority. In addition, there were several periods of empire-wide persecution which were directed from the seat of government in Rome.

The stories of these martyrdoms (some of which we’ll read about in week 5) are all about stoicism and the miraculous escape from pain. As Talal Asad will point out in his book on suicide bombing, it’s really difficult to assign intentionality to dead people, but it’s reasonable to conclude that death was a good alternative to betraying one’s faith and community.

From a historical perspective, these martyr stories were a great boon to Christianity because they gave rise to popular saints’ cults and were used in helping to spread the faith.

Some examples: [slides]

St. Stephen
traditionally regarded as the first martyr of Christianity, was, according to the Acts of the Apostles, a deacon in the early church at Jerusalem who aroused the enmity of members of various synagogues by his teachings. Accused of blasphemy, at his trial he made a long speech fiercely denouncing the Jewish authorities who were sitting in judgement on him and was stoned to death. His martyrdom was witnessed by Saul of Tarsus (later better known by his Roman name, Paul), a Pharisee who would later become a follower himself of Jesus and an apostle.

Perpetua and Felicity
were Christian martyrs of the 3rd century. Perpetua was a married noblewoman, said to have been 22 years old at the time of her death, and mother of an infant she was nursing. Felicity, her slave and pregnant at the time, was martyred with her. They were put to death along with others at Carthage in the Roman province of Africa.

These martyrs patterned themselves after Christ, whose martyrdom is of course the symbolic foundation of the entire Christian faith; I'll talk more about Christ next week, and I'll talk more about early Christian martyrs in week 3.

Ok, now, finally, we can talk about images.
Early Christian imagery

Early Christian imagery did not appear much before 200 ce (3\textsuperscript{rd} ce), when it seems to have appeared quite suddenly.

Q: If there were no images in the first 200 years of Christianity, why not?

A:

(1) Judaism prohibited the pictorial representation of God (Second of the Ten Commandments) in which ‘idols’ were defined as man-made objects which contain no divine essence and which are therefore inappropriate to represent the divine.

(2) Other possible reasons for the proscription of images of God, Jesus, and God’s creation: to create such images was to challenge God’s role as the primary creator of the earth and its inhabitants.

(3) Another possible reason or the late emergence of imagery in the Christian faith is the possibility that being a ‘religion of the book’ – a verbal/textual tradition: the Gospel or “good news” was essentially a verbal matter.

The earliest Christian imagery focused on function:

- to relate stories,
- to prompt memories of oral or written tradition,
- to confirm/bolster Christians’ faith,
- early Christian images did not serve as self expression or decoration nor did they address ideas about originality, or beauty.

Catacombs: Structure and Function

* Catacombs were a common burial structure, older than Christianity.

* Catacombs were hewn out of tufa, a volcanic rock that hardens in contact with air.

* The catacomb could be dug easily because the tufa was soft, but as they passage-ways were dug and developed contact with the air hardened the tufa making the catacombs strong and resilient.

[slide]

* The first levels were dug just below the surface of the earth, later levels were dug more deeply and so on.

\textit{arcosolium} (painting in arced ceiling) \textit{loculi} (burial niche, C. SS. Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, 3-4 \textsuperscript{ce}}

loculi held 2 – 3 bodies that were sealed with rocks or marble slabs….

* Christian catacomb wall paintings are the most prevalent images from the first centuries of Christianity that remain today

* These survived better than other forms of art (metal can be melted down; stone used for fill or for other kinds of pagan decoration, or destroyed).
* Catacomb painters were not formally trained artists, but grave diggers. Most of the image makers were generally modest workmen fashioning simple representations needed by the Christian community.

* Thus image making was largely left to ordinary individuals -- not elite or highly trained artists.

* Later in the 8 -9th centuries, the clergy developed a strong desire to dictate and control Christian image-making. (Charles-Murray, Matthews)

**Visual Language and Iconography**

Q: How were images selected for portrayal?

A: Primarily drawn from Scripture.

Selected pagan/Roman images were chosen for their usefulness in the context of the new Christian faith, and their ambiguity was a strong component of their effectiveness.

[slide]

In the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, Christ is depicted beardless, as a youth, with short hair – in keeping with more Roman depictions of men and gods.

Ambiguity permitted Christians to use Roman images to communicate Christian ideas while also avoiding the threat of persecution.

Ambiguity also meant that images could convey several ideas at once, and thus their imaginative reach could extend beyond the obvious association of the image.

The value of a sign/image/symbol is in its brevity or ambiguity – the more schematic, the more it prompts the viewer to “build on the image” presented.

[slide]

An Example: Fish were a common decorative motif in Greco-roman imagery, but put to use by Christians, images of fish could become much more.

*Define Syncretism: combining of different faith systems, often with an attempt to create inclusiveness*

*Crucifixions*

One image that is very common to us, but virtually nonexistent in the first 300 years of Christianity is the image of a crucified Christ.

In the ancient world, execution by crucifixion came with particular shame and humiliation and the notion that Christians followed a deity executed in this manner came with considerable stigma.

It was also distinctive imagery that might call attention to Christians in hostile regions.
Thus the crucifixion was probably rejected in favor of other more ambiguous imagery until the legalization of Christianity by Constantine and even later during the Byzantine era.

[slide] Parody of crucifixion, 3rd ce, Imperial Palace, Palatine Hill, Rome
This image was scratched into a plaster wall on the Imperial Palace around 3rd CE. It is one of the rare references to a crucifixion found during this period. Most scholars agree this was an anti-Christian parody.

[slide] Good shepherd

Perhaps the most prevalent example of syncretic imagery, the Good Shepherd, could also be Hermes the Shepherd of the Roman pantheon, or Orpheus among the animals.

The image of Christ as a “good shepherd” is a common theme, appearing well over 100 times among the Roman in the catacombs.

From the 23rd Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul.”

It seems that early Christians were more focused on aspects other than Christ’s suffering—i.e. resurrection, healing, community, prayer. Images in the catacombs were designed to bring hope—especially in an era of intense persecution of Christians.

The Byzantine Empire
Byzantium was the original name of Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul in Turkey).

Constantinople was the capital of Constantine’s Roman Empire, thus historians refer to this era/area of the Roman Empire as the Byzantine Empire.

Scholars differ as to the ‘end’ of the Byzantine Empire – most point to the mid-15th century with the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks.

Christianity was first legalized by Constantine in 313, then declared the official religion of the Holy Roman (Byzantine) Empire.

The Imperial underwriting of Christianity had an enormous impact on both the theology of the faith and its images.

Byzantine art—especially icons—continue to be made and used in the same manner established in the early centuries of Christianity. Today however, icon use is principally a devotional practice associated with the Eastern Orthodox and Russian Orthodox faiths.

[slide]

These wall pieces differ from the catacomb paintings because the images often draw on
imperial imagery, are *commissioned by the Emperor*, and may include portraits of emperors with religious figures.

Thus medium, scale and the training of the creators suggest that Christianity is no longer a fledgling spiritual practice, but a strongly emerging faith, backed by money and royal influence.

Similar to catacomb imagery, early Byzantine art does not employ the crucifixion, though during the iconoclastic period, crosses displaced figurative images.

**Links between Imperial culture and Christian images**

Rulers were involved in the question of Christ’s divinity and humanity, calling councils to discuss theological issues (the Council of Nicea was one).

Emperors and Empresses insert themselves into religious images associating themselves with Christ.

Iconic images of Mary and Jesus appear in ‘enthroned’ contexts or in the upright, formal manner of the court portraits of Justinian and Theodora at San Vitale.

The rich luxury of mosaics suggests imperial patronage.[additional slides]

**Icons**

The images of Christ we are most familiar with today emerged from the tradition of the Byzantine icon.

The word *icon* derives from the Greek word *eikon* for “image” and includes all kinds of images.

Scholars’ use of the word *icon* generally refers to specifically Byzantine-era panel paintings created in the Byzantine tradition depicting a sacred subject. The image functions specifically as a ritual or devotional object.

The earliest Byzantine icons date from the 6th ce, but it is clear they existed before this.

The first icons took the form of portraits; while the faces appear emotive, but they lack clear facial *expressions*.

icons were, and continue to be, created to instill in the devotee a sense of stillness and timelessness.

*The Artistic Question:* what was the proper manner in which to depict Christ? Was this appropriate or possible?

Following Exodus, many theologians argued that God, being invisible, inconceivable and limitless could not be represented. However, because God had, through Christ, become
man, Christ could and **must** be depicted in human form for the sake of man’s salvation. Thus the defense of the images was based largely upon the doctrine of the Incarnation, if one took Jesus to be a ‘depiction’ of God.

*slide*  **Shroud of Turin, Vatican Veronica veil**  
Another solution was a specific type of icon: *acheiropoieta*, meaning “not made by human hands.”

[explain Veronica story]  
The Vatican Veronica veil and the cloth we know as the shroud of Turin are examples of this type of image. Images of divine or mystical origin and as such are viewed as authentic and accurate.

*slide*  **Image of Edessa (detail and in reliquary)**  
Another *acheiropoieta* was the Image of Edessa, a holy relic consisting of a square or rectangle of cloth upon which a miraculous image of the face of Jesus was imprinted — the first icon ("image").

According to the legend, King Abgar of Edessa wrote to Jesus, asking him to come cure him of an illness. Abgar received a letter from Jesus, declining the invitation, but promising a future visit by one of his disciples. Included with the Jesus’ letter to Abgar was a likeness of Jesus, impressed into cloth.

*slide*  Using these images as models and sources for icons, the divine and miraculous powers of *acheiropoieta* were imparted on copies.

*slide*  **Mary Hodegetria**  
Images of Mary became critically important as another sign that pointed toward Christ and particularly the Incarnation.

*The Virgin Hodegetria, 14th ce*  
The letters on the left and right in this particular image appear to be an adaptation of the usual inscription that occupies this position in other Hodegetrias: Greek letters referring to “Mother of God.”

Hodegetria refers to the Hodegon Monastery in Constantinople, which has such an icon. depicts (1) the Virgin Mary holds Christ on her left arm and (2) gestures toward him with the elongated fingers of her right hand, showing that he is the way to salvation, (3) while his right hand forms a gesture of blessing.

Word hodegtria also means “she who shows the way”

The Hodegetria was believed to have originated by St. Luke who was said to have painted a portrait of the Virgin while she was alive. Thus there was authority in the original image that passed on to copies made of it.

*slide*  **St. Luke painting the Virgin and Child, El Greco, 16th ce**  
Images of the Virgin Mary gained their authority from the belief that St. Luke the evangelist and apostle had painted an image of Mary and Jesus.
And then here we have our most familiar figure

[slide] Christ Pantocrator 84 X 45.5 cm. encaustic. 6th century. Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, Egypt
- frontal view and timeless quality.
- Bejeweled book cover -- the Gospels
- Halo of gold leaf and punched.
- Large eyes are a hallmark of most icons as the eyes are the window of the soul
- Christ as Teacher: the gesture of Christ's right hand is not the gesture of blessing, but the orator's gesture. "With his hand he makes the 'orator's gesture' which indicates that he is speaking, or that he has the right to speak."

The history of this image is that it may have been modeled on an acheiropoietan image and/or a text indicating describing Christ's appearance.

Being thus based on 'authentic' information, this image of the bearded Christ with brown eyes, shoulder-length brown hair may be the earliest form of this depiction which has remained popular.

[slide] Image of 6th century pantocrator and 20th ce pantocrator
The link between these two images suggest the nature of the tradition of icon writing – figures are copied, minor changes in the background can be added – but the figure never deviates from the source.

The power and authority comes from its lineage with an original.

These images like the previous ones draws on imperial visual representation

As we move on, we'll talk about the interplay between this image of Christ as ruler and the image of Christ as abject, suffering victim