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Mystery Religions

August 5, 2015

The Iconography of Christ-Apollo

Jesus Christ as a tall, slender man with dark hair parted down the middle and a dark beard is a very familiar and traditional visual. But this image, so recognizable throughout the world, was not the established artistic tradition when Christianity began. Throughout the first several centuries there was no established tradition so artists varied and experimented with how they represented Christ. As the Christian church evolved, so did Christ's image.

The art of early Christianity represents Christ in two distinct ways. Both based off imagery of Roman Gods, one tradition depicts Christ as a wise and bearded man, while the other shows Christ as an eternal youth. While the bearded Christ's foundation is loosely based off the image of Zeus, the youthful, beardless Christ is deeply rooted in the pagan iconography of Dionysus, Orpheus, and Apollo. Artists used the images, symbols, and concepts familiar throughout the culture to represent their god. Most influential to this early representation was the iconography of Apollo, also known as Helios or Sol, widely familiar because of the established dominance of the cult of Sol Invictus in the Roman Empire. Through early Christianity's struggle to find an appropriate representation of Christ, artists turned to the pagan iconography of mystery religions. Whether making a direct stand against the cult or simply using the embedded artistic vocabulary of the culture, the

early Christian image of Christ was formed from the symbolism of Apollo and the cult of Sol Invictus.

In a culture where images were worshipped and iconographic patterns were well established and familiar, it was difficult for early Christian artists to artistically represent their beliefs. The earliest examples of Christian art do not appear until the third century. This could be because the art just did not survive. Or perhaps artistic representation was limited or even prevented because the practice of Christianity was illegal. Regardless, 300 years after Christ's death, Christians were still struggling to find a common visual for their most important figure. There was not a set vocabulary for Christian imagery as there was for pagan. Christians were also firmly opposed to the worshipping of idols, which art could and did become in the ancient world. For this reason, leaders of the church never established a universal picture of Christ. Even the first-hand accounts of seeing Christ are contradictory. In the Acts of John, two of the Apostles see Christ at the same time and yet record conflicting images. The Cloth of Memphis, a relic that allegedly recorded Christ's image when he used it to wipe his face, adds to the mystery of what he really looked like. "The imprint that his face left on the veil was widely worshipped as an image, not made by human hands, 'but it was too bright for us to concentrate on since, as you went on concentrating, it changed before your eyes'" (Chavannes-Mazel, 29). Chavannes-Mazel concludes that the church never cleared up the question of what Christ truly looked like for a reason. "The early Church had always been strict in forbidding the adoration of images and therefore did not want Christ's face to be

memorable” (Chavannes-Mazel, 29). This explains Christ’s two contrasting images circulating through the first several centuries.

In contrast, the iconography of Sol Invictus was familiar and prolific throughout the Roman Empire. As Christianity worked to develop a presence in a pagan empire, Christian artists found the characteristics between Christ and Sol Invictus beneficial to their cause. The symbols of Sol Invictus were already so engrained in the culture that it became easier to transfer their meaning instead of attempting their removal. Jensen argues that this transfer of meaning was not just convenient but a stand against the pagan beliefs.

These adaptations of Roman iconographic models serve less as clear evidence of religious syncretism, than of the continuity of symbols in the culture. They may even reflect a degree of overt competition with figures from pagan religion and myth. (44)

Jensen continues that the similarities between the deities allowed artists to illustrate Christian beliefs through the use of the cult’s familiar symbols.

Worship of the sun god was a dominant practice in many cultures of the ancient world. But it wasn’t until the Roman Empire that Sol flourished and became a major figure. Emperor Caracalla (198-211 C.E.) was the first to attribute Sol with the title *Invictus*, “the invincible one” (Jones, 8510). The emperor Elagabalus (218-222 C.E.) chose to go by the name Heliogabalus, the very title of the Syrian solar god (Evola, 304). He attempted to import the Syrian cult of the sun god but it did not last. Under the emperor Aurelian (270-275 C.E.) however, the monotheistic cult of Sol thrived and became dominant. Through a “vigorous campaign of propaganda”

(Jones, 8510), the sun god became the “exclusive protector of Rome’s imperial might” (Jones, 8510) and his cult was established at the center of Roman public worship. Evola claims that establishing Sol Invictus as the central god was part of a larger movement to reinforce the dominance of the empire.

Rome at that age felt more and more keenly the need of strengthening and defending herself, on the spiritual, intellectual and religious plane, just as she had done on the political and military one. This was also connected with the struggle against the advance of Christianity. (304)

Even as Sol Invictus became the “chief divinity of the Empire” (Evola, 303) and his cult thrived at the heart of religious Rome, the devotion to Jesus Christ and the “cult” of Christianity also steadily increased. The emperor Constantine thoroughly amalgamated the two gods and their iconography. Constantine is known for being the first emperor to convert to Christianity and establishing the religion as a recognized legal practice throughout the empire. He combined the two religions for his personal use as well, maintaining an altar to Sol throughout his life and converting to Christianity on his deathbed. “Until 317 the Sol Invictus appears on the imperial coins of Constantine, even though we see on them also the image of the Sovereign bearing the labarum with the Cross” (Evola, 305). The coins demonstrate Constantine’s preservation of the symbols of the cult and the simultaneous promotion of Christianity.

Long before artistic comparisons, the parallel between Christ and Apollo was well established. In 195 C.E. Clement of Alexandria wrote an exhortation to the Greeks to accept Christianity. As he condones the Greeks for believing in immoral

and false gods, he uses the characteristics of Apollo to describe Christ. He calls Christ the “Sun of the Resurrection” whose “beams bestow life” (9). Clement goes on to say that Christ is the “one begotten before the morning star, who gives life with his own rays” (9). In the pagan tradition, Apollo, Helios, or Sol, is the Sun who bestows life through his beams. Clement’s parallel of Christ and Apollo is visually manifested in a mosaic found in the mausoleum below the Vatican. This third century mosaic, known as the Jesus-Helios, shows Christ in a chariot pulled by horses. Christ is crowned with a halo from which the rays of the sun extend. There is an almost identical mosaic located at the Villa at Orbe Bosceaz in Switzerland. “Apollo as Sunday” also dates to the third century. Like the Jesus-Helios, Apollo is in a chariot pulled by horses with a radial halo. Though describing Christ, both mosaics illustrate Clement’s description as “a charioteer ascending into heaven and bringing dawn and eternal life with him” (Jensen, 42). The only indication that one is Christ while the other is Apollo is their location. “Apollo as Sunday” is part of a villa’s larger floor mosaic that attributes a different pagan god to each day of the week. Sunday became the day of Apollo when Aurelian established the cult of Sol Invictus. The Jesus-Helios is in the Tomb of the Julii, part of Rome’s catacombs. As Christianity was a subversive and illegal religion in the empire, the catacombs served as a burial ground for Christians and became a gallery for their artists. Thus the two mosaics, though identical in iconography, are in fact one pagan and one Christian deity. Jensen claims that the Jesus-Helios mosaic is evidence of Christianity’s outright challenge to the pagan mystery religions.

Such a representation is not evidence of Christian syncretism but rather of symbol conversion or appropriation. In these cases, the suitability of a composition had more to do with its symbolic functionality than with its original source. Portraying Jesus as the Sun God may have directly challenged the cult of Sol Invictus by appropriating its iconography and transferring it to Sol's replacement in the new Christian cult (42)

Whether a convenience of function or a direct confrontation, the artistic parallel between Christ's image and Apollo's was a conscious and religious choice.

Through the transitions of rulers and refurbishing to meet different sects doctrines, even through iconoclasm and the bombings in WWII, the mosaics of Ravenna, Italy remain. These mosaics, located in eight different churches throughout Ravenna are some of the best preserved examples of Early Christian art. One of these is a ceiling mosaic in the Arian Baptistery. Built during the fifth century by the Goth ruler Theodoric, the baptistery was a freestanding addition to his new church, the Santa Maria in Cosmedin. The ceiling mosaic, located in the central dome, is an example of the iconographic influence of the cult of Sol Invictus. Christ stands in the water to be baptized as John the Baptist touches his head in blessing. The Holy Ghost, in the form of a dove, pours water onto Christ's head. On Christ's left is a bearded elderly man. Following the Roman tradition, he is the personification of the River Jordan. He has lobster claw horns, is holding a rush, and sitting next to a vase from which water flows. This mosaic transfers the typical physical characteristics of Apollo to the body of Christ.

Apollo, the god of the sun and light, was also the god of health and of youth. As adolescents reached manhood they cut their hair as a symbol of leaving youth behind. This act was done in dedication to Apollo. Because of this, Mathews explains, "Apollo is perpetually adolescent, his nude body at the peak of pubescent youth. His hair is abundant, often with the front locks tied up on top, ready to be shorn in token sacrifice at coming of age. In this context abundance of hair is a sign of "fresh and undiminished fertility"" (127). Long, loose hair was a recognizable trait of divinity in Greek and Roman art. By using this hairstyle for Christ, Early Christian artists were intentionally marking him as a god and assimilating him with the sun god. Like Apollo, Christ's hairstyle is "generally long and loose and always has the effect of distancing him from those around him" (Mathews, 123-124). Not only did the hair mark him as divine, it also distinguished him from his companions. The hairstyle, an artistic device used to parallel Christ with Apollo, became the one iconographic tradition that was preserved throughout the history of Christ's image.

In copying Apollo's hairstyle, Christ took on other feminine aspects of the pagan god. As patron of the arts, Apollo took on many feminine characteristics. He led the muses in song and dance, and is often represented in the dress of a woman. It is also common to see Apollo depicted with breasts as an indication of his androgynous characteristics. Because of this, many early Christ images are also depicted with breasts. The Statuette of Seated Christ, 350 C.E., the *Traditio Legis* and the Seated Christ, both details of sarcophagi from the fifth century, as well as the Arian Baptistery mosaic, all represent Christ with breasts. Mathews expounds, "The parallel with Apollo is especially striking. Both Christ and Apollo represent a type of

adolescent youth with just-incipient breasts” (135). This early conception of Christ, modeling the androgynous and feminine aspects of Apollo is well illustrated in the mosaic of the Arian Baptistery. In contrast to the hulking, heavily bearded, defined and robust males, “Christ is beardless with slender shoulders, girlish breasts, and smoothly modeled body. His sex is visible beneath the water, but his hips are wide and his body is hairless” (Mathews, 135). Though this early Christ image was modeled after the ideal of Apollo, Apollo was not the only god who took on feminine traits. Zeus gave birth to both Athena and Dionysus and thus became a patron of childbirth, identifiable in art with breasts. Serapis was also occasionally depicted with breasts, “to associate him with the fertility of the Nile” (Mathews, 135). The intention of these female characteristics was to imply the gods “life-giving fecundity” (Mathews, 135). Christ’s femininity should do the same.

As the early Christ image adopted the surrounding culture’s imagery, exemplified with the Arian Baptistery and the Jesus-Helios, Christ came to take Apollo’s, or Sol Invictus’, place completely. Sol Invictus as the dominant celestial power became subordinate to Christ (Evola, 305). Officially established with Constantine’s conversion and the Edict of Milan, “The Sun God is no longer the Supreme, the sovereign God of the Universe, whose reflection is the imperial universality of Rome. He has become subject and servant to a loftier divinity, the God of the Christians” (Evola, 305). As Sol Invictus lost his standing to the world of Christianity, the image of Christ moved farther away from its pagan roots. “Finally, after Iconoclasm, Christ’s image is fixed into the one and only acknowledged portrait: that of the slender man with dark undulating hair parted in the middle and

a thin dark beard" (Chavannes-Mazel, 32). Although the process was slow and standardization was not imposed, the wise, dark-haired, and bearded man eventually completely replaced the youthful, androgynous Christ-Apollo.

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