A Summary of the Iconoclastic Controversy

- The controversy occurred, officially, in two waves: 726-780 c.e. and 814-843 c.e.
- The first wave began with the decree to abolish icons by Emperor Leo III in 726. This decree was followed by another in 730 which led to the active destruction of icons.
- The first icon to be destroyed in 730 was one of Christ above an entrance to the imperial palace.
- A riot followed. The people of Constantinople rose up against the army (which was firmly behind the position of the Emperor.) The man who destroyed the icon mentioned above was killed, and the man who killed him was tortured to death.
- The sides:
  - Iconoclasts (destroyers of Icons) -- a real minority among the faithful, but this minority included the Emperor and the Army, as well as certain bishops and a minority of monks.
  - Iconodules (venerators of Icons) -- represented the popular position, and especially the position of the majority of monasteries (who were highly influential among the general public, and were, themselves, willing to get physical in opposition to Iconoclasm.)
- Under Leo and his son, Emperor Constantine Copronymus the conflict developed into a wholesale persecution of the Iconodules, and especially of the monastics. Torture and death were common, as was the forcing of monks to break their monastic vows.
- Many monks emigrated to the West where the Popes were sympathetic.

Sources of Iconoclasm:

- There are no tidy answers to this one.
- Possible Modem and Jewish influences, especially on the Army which had been drawn mostly from Asia Minor (as had Emperor Leo III).
- There was a "trend" toward the destruction of images in synagogues as well as in the native theology of Islam which found sympathy with some Christians, if for no other reason than that it made relations with these other groups easier.
- There was also a native trend toward iconoclasm, though it was not the majority, in Christianity itself.
- Docetism remained strong in some pockets of the Byzantine empire.
- There were probably residual tendencies toward Iconoclasm which had trickled down from gnosticism -- notably, the Iconoclasts appear to have sharply divided the spiritual and material worlds, declaring the former to be good and the latter so corrupt that it was not to be elevated through art.

Other Iconoclasts adopted, like certain of the Jewish communities recently had, a very literal and strict reading of the second commandment:

- Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them, nor serve them, for I Jehovah thy God am a jealous God, ..."
- (This commandment remains the chief reason for Iconoclasm among certain Protestant groups to this day.)

The Iconoclastic Controversy, continued:

- The first phase came to an end when he died and his wife, Empress Irene, took the throne in 780.
- While far from a saint herself (she would do just about anything to maintain power) she was an Iconodule, and she immediately restored the practice of veneration.
- She began purging the Iconoclast bishops installed by her predecessors. When the office of the Patriarch of Constantinople came open it was filled, by popular demand as much as anything, with Tarasius (784-806). He and the Empress began preparing for an ecumenical council.
- Insurrections in the army delayed the council until 787. In that year it met in Nicaea to settle the issue under a guarantee of freedom of Speech by Irene.
- Both sides put forth their case, but (rather predictably, given the persuasion of Irene as well as the populace) Icons were restored to the churches.
- Although the papacy generally supported the Iconodules (without necessarily recognizing what the theological issues were) Charlemagne did not.
- In response to the Council in Nicaea (787) he called a council in Frankfort which condemned the results of Irene's Council.
- Frankfort was directed as much against a rival, and scandalously female, emperor as against the theology of the East. Nevertheless, the theological issues were there.
- (Not great for the implications of relations between East and West.)
- A second, and less violent, wave of Iconoclasm began with Leo V in 814.
- In 842 another empress came to power, Theodora. She convened another council in 843 (also in Nicaea) which permanently restored Icons. Because this council added nothing to the previous council, but merely ended the second phase of the debate, the two ‘Nicaea’s” are merged together and treated as a single council -- the seventh.

The (Eastern) Orthodox Response:

- There were clearly heretical arguments involved in the defenders of Iconoclasm (reflecting the anti-material-world heresies -- dualism between the material and spiritual).
- Icons are not good but necessary because without them the mind tends to split the union of the spiritual and material realms which were united in Christ.
- The Iconoclasts also appeared to be rejecting the veneration of the saints (which had been present since the early persecutions.)
- The use of icons in worship could be traced back to the earliest worship of the Church, and, in fact, synagogues of the first century also were covered in art. (Argument from tradition.)
- Those who take the second commandment out of context make two errors:
  - Not reading the whole verse for the reasoning of the commandment: “Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor 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. Thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them, nor serve them, for I Jehovah thy God am a jealous God, ...”
  - And not recognizing that in the same conversation with Moses (on the top of Mt. Sinai) God commanded the making of images of both heavenly and earthly things to facilitate worship. (And Solomon’s Temple was even more image-filled.)
- Therefore the second commandment prohibits the worshipping of the objects, but not the proper use of them to direct worship toward God.
- Images of the human form can also be used this way now that God has become human and redeemed the material world.
- Icons are not worshiped, but are a means of worshiping God, Whose presence is manifest in what the Icon represents (be it Christ or a saint.) (latreia vs. proskuneis)