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Peter Paul Rubens's Investigation of the Origins of Idolatry and Iconoclasm in the Jesuit Church of Antwerp

Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656), a Jesuit missionary active in southern India in the seventeenth century, described the origins of idolatrous practices in his *Nitya Jivana Callāpam (Dialogue on Eternal Life)*, the first Christian theological text written in Tamil. According to Jesuits on the overseas mission field, the only proper response to idolatry was iconoclasm and missionaries like St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552) became known for the destruction of idols and temples throughout the world. Back in Europe, Jesuits celebrated these victories over foreign gods by commissioning images depicting iconoclastic acts. One of the most well-known examples is Peter Paul Rubens's *The Miracles of St. Francis Xavier*, created for the Jesuit Church in Antwerp in 1617 or 1618. It was not the only image of iconoclasm in this church. In 1620, Rubens was commissioned to design thirty-nine additional paintings for the aisles and the galleries. Here, he included two more images of iconoclasm – *The Martyrdom of St. Eugenia* and *St. John Chrysostom*. There is no other Jesuit church in the world where the theme of idol smashing is so prominent. While this paper will argue that Rubens's depictions of iconoclasm were very much conditioned by recent events in the history of Antwerp regarding the use and destruction of political and sacred images, it will also maintain that Rubens's paintings were presenting a visual examination of the origins of idolatry, similar to De Nobili's text cited above. The three iconoclasms depicted in the Antwerp Jesuit Church combine to create a history of the various forms that idols can take. Rubens begins with the destruction of a statue depicting a tyrannical queen, the Byzantine Empress Eudoxia, on order of St. John Chrysostom, and moves on to St. Eugenia's destruction of a Greco-Roman god. Finally, we see the relocation of paganism and idolatry in time and space, with this series of images culminating in the altarpiece with a supposedly contemporary depiction of an Indian god. The Hindu idol in Rubens's painting of St. Francis Xavier serves as the epitome of an incorrect image, monstrous and devilish, and is intended to provide a contrast to Rubens's altarpiece itself, which functions as a correct image within its Counter-Reformation context, intended to instruct, delight, and move the viewer to greater devotion.