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# THE SEVENTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL AND THE VENERATION OF ICONS IN ORTHODOXY

## ABSTRACT

In the Orthodox Christian tradition, icons are not regarded as works of art; they are rather a visual gospel and windows into the spiritual realm. They are intended to assist believers to be more contemplative and prayerful. They guide believers into a life of prayer. There are, however, those who consider them to be idolatrous. Such a belief is erroneous, since the honouring of created beings does not detract from being totally devoted to the Creator in whose image they were created. Icons portraying God's grace are sanctifying and help affirm the faith of Orthodox believers. Icons are a concrete theology that instructs and leads believers to a spiritual reality and ultimately sanctify them as they transform them. They ultimately serve as conduits to the healing of body and soul through the grace of God and are essentially a prelude to the final transfiguration of the world.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Orthodox Church or Orthodox Church is well known for its use of icons. It is a "right-believing" Church, from the Greek "ὀρθόδοξος", which literally means "straight path". It is total faithfulness and dedication to the truth. The founder of the Church is Jesus Christ who is the Divine Word and personal revelation of God the Father. In its churches and in the homes of its adherents, one encounters many Holy icons. What are icons? They are religious pictures, portraits or images, mainly associated with the paintings found in Orthodox Churches, which are used to depict God's image and the Lord Jesus Christ, Angels, Orthodox Saints and events in biblical and church history. They portray Biblical events, parables and events that occurred in the course of the history of the Church. An icon is

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basically two-dimensional (Ouspensky & Lossky 1994). They are painted in egg tempura on wood; however, there are icons that are created by using mosaic tiles to create an image, stone or wood carving, embroidery on cloth, printed on paper or even metal. Icons play a very important role in the life and worship of the Orthodox Church. The word “icon” is derived from the Greek “εἰκων”. The word is found in the Septuagint (Greek Bible), where we read: “Then God said, let us make man in our image ... so God created man in His own image, in the image of God he created” (Gen. 1:26-27). In the New Testament, in the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians, we read: “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). Icons are theology in colour; they represent the gospel in colour, and reflect images of holy and heroic Christians. Together with the Holy Bible, iconography and prayer are the gateway into the mystery of Orthodox Christian spirituality. In Orthodox tradition, it is accepted that icons are a living memorial to the Divine energy (St. John Damascene, P.G. 94:1248CD) and a means of receiving healing and grace. Through the Incarnation of the Logos, man atoned with God and was restored to his earlier glory. In Christ is realised a second creation of man – Jesus is the new Adam. In this sense, the concealed image of God was renovated for the benefit of humanity – and so it is with icons.

St. John of Shanghai describes the reaction that icons produce in an Eastern Orthodox person:

An Icon is an image which leads us to a holy, God-pleasing person, or raises us up to Heaven, or evokes a feeling of repentance, of compunction, of prayer, a feeling that one must bow down before this image. The value of an Icon lies in the fact that, when we approach it, we want to pray before it with reverence. If the image elicits this feeling, it is an Icon.<sup>1</sup>

In the second of the Ten Commandments, we read that we should not have any graven images before God. However, this is far too literal. Scripture does not interpret this as an injunction of images in any strict or literal sense. In Exodus 26:1, we read: “Moreover you shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains woven of fine linen thread, and blue and purple and scarlet yarn; with artistic designs of cherubim you shall weave them”. What are these depictions if not icons? God also links His manifestation with images in Exodus 25:22: “And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim

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1 St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco, *A discourse in iconography*. [http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/icon\\_discourse.aspx](http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/icon_discourse.aspx).

which are on the ark of the Testimony, of all things which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel”.

St. Theodore of Studios (759-826), who was one of the main Orthodox antagonists of the Byzantine iconoclasts, stated: “If merely mental contemplation had been sufficient, it would have been enough for him to come to us in a merely mental way”. Jesus, however, took human form and came to us in the image of a man – He was thus an “icon” of God. The renowned Orthodox Theologian Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos) states:

An icon is not simply a religious picture designed to arouse appropriate emotions in the beholder; it is one of the ways whereby God is revealed to us. Through icons the Orthodox Christian receives a vision of the spiritual world (Ware 1979:31).

He thus hypothesises that icons depicting Christ, the Virgin Mary, Saints and Church history grant believers a spiritual panorama. Icons are a very basic theme of Orthodox spirituality. This is stressed by St. Germanus of Constantinople, who, when deliberating on icons, re-emphasises the utterance of St. John Chrysostom, who is adamant that the entire issue of icons is overflowing with devotion (P.G. 98:149B, Patriarch Germanus I of Constantinople, *Epistle on the veneration of icons*). If photography existed in the time of Christ, would we not have had a myriad of photographs of His image in our homes and Churches today? So why do holy icons pose a problem for some? Do we not keep images of our loved ones at home? Do we worship these or do we simply venerate them?

## 2. EARLY ICONOGRAPHY AND THE CURRENT STATUS OF ICONS

Iconography is an old art form for which the ancient Egyptians were renowned. Some of their most famous works of art are frescoes representing stories and various mythological subjects. Such frescoes were found, among other places, in the tomb of the ancient priest Pet Osiris at Tuna-el-Gebel near Mallawi in the province of Al-Menia, Egypt. We also see iconography painted on the sarcophagi in which Pharaohs and other prominent ancient Egyptians were buried. The lids of the sarcophagi were carved and then painted to exhibit a portrait of the interred person such as, for example, King Tutankhamen who was buried in the Valley of the Kings. Many wealthy individuals were thus buried with icons of their portraits on the lid of their sarcophagus.

The Egyptians deeply believed in the virtue of a person; his/her name and appearance painted on a sarcophagus was equal to making him/her

live beyond the physical disappearance of the body. Consequently, the icon of the deceased was painted on his/her sarcophagus and sometimes also in the funerary temple. Such icons would also be useful for the deceased to identify himself to Osiris (the god of the dead in the Egyptian pantheon) in the afterworld (Sauneron & Yoyotte 1959). Icons are more than merely religious pictures and when Orthodox believers venerate icons, they demonstrate respect and honour for them, since they understand that they are simply expressing deep feelings for the people and events that are depicted.

In his view on the origins of icons in the art of the catacombs, Leonid Ouspensky explains:

Separate symbols were used not only from Old and New Testaments (lamb, good shepherd, fish ...) but also from pagan mythology, as for instance, Cupid and Psyche, Orpheus, etc. In using these myths, Christianity re-establishes their true and profound meaning, filling them with new content. In other words, Christianity selects and adopts from the pagan world all there was of its own, that is, all that was 'Christian before Christ'... (Ouspensky 1978:).

They are not thus venerating the icon for the icon's sake. Any veneration is towards the person depicted (Ouspensky 1978). Leontius of Naples states:

We do not make obeisance to the nature of wood, but revere and make obeisance to Him who was crucified on the Cross ... (P.G. 94:1384D).

Furthermore, icons are: "opened books to remind us of God" (P.G. 95:1276A, John of Damascus, *De Compt. Nat.* 3). The use of icons was particularly popular in the East, and this was in part due to the assimilation of pagan concepts including forms of worship and customs. In addition, Alexandrian Christology emphasised the permeation of human nature by the divine nature of Jesus Christ.

The ancient Greeks and Romans had similar traditions, as is evidenced in Paphos in Cyprus and elsewhere. It is believed that the iconographic style, as evidenced in Orthodoxy, made its initial appearance during the first three centuries of Christianity (Ouspensky & Lossky 1994). Icons depicting both Old and New Testament people and events in Church history were used to educate the masses of the faithful who were, for the most part, illiterate about the Christian faith. At that time as nowadays, they were also used to assist the believers in prayer and meditation with respect to the person depicted and the salvific importance of events portrayed. In a sense, icons helped believers focus on prayer and reminded them

of the immanence and omnipresence of God. According to tradition, St. Luke the Evangelist painted the first icon of the Virgin Mary, as did the apostles Peter and Paul. The use of icons dates back to the first century when Christians used representations of events recorded in Holy Scripture to decorate their tombs. Events from the life of Christ, dating back to the second century, have been found in Alexandria. These depictions increased until the Iconoclastic controversy in 726.

There is no doubt that early Christians began painting images of Christ, of His Mother, and of holy people in their homes and churches, mainly as an impulsive assertion of their faithfulness and love for Jesus. The honouring of God and the commemoration of the Virgin Mary and Saints and events in Church history through the use of creative depictions almost certainly seemed to be normal to them; it was, in fact, common practice to possess holy icons (Bigham 2004). In their simplest form, icons adorned catacombs, graves and wherever ancient Christians went to worship God. Early icons included the fish, the cross, the lamb and other symbols representing Our Lord Jesus Christ. They were primarily found in homes, but by the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., their use was widespread and they were found in churches and homes as well as in other places of worship, such as caves. Since the majority of early Christians emanated from pagan cultures and many were also illiterate, icons became an important way to assist in the transmission and comprehension of religiously important historical events and Biblical teachings with their very unique spiritual meanings. Therefore, as the average person found it difficult to assimilate Christian doctrine, the Early Church condoned the use of religious icons to illustrate Christianity and help the faithful understand the new religion (Cabasilas 1960).

Icons were also commonly used in the catacombs:

The themes of the catacomb paintings, beginning with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries ... These paintings correspond to the sacred texts, biblical, liturgic and patristic (Ouspensky & Lossky 1994:26).

The Church was very happy to depict the Lord and His saints in icons, as this was considered another means of praising God and teaching about Him in the same way that music, Byzantine chant, was used to this end. In the homes of Orthodox believers, it is not uncommon to find an icon stand or *iconostasis* dedicated to exhibiting iconographic images in a room that is often used, such as a kitchen or lounge, for example (The Iconic and Symbolic in Orthodox Iconography). Some homes only displayed one icon, usually Our Lord Jesus Christ as a child in the arms of His mother, the *Theotokos* (God-bearer). Orthodox Churches are, however, resplendent with a profusion of icons. Many icons across the world are considered to be “wonder-working”. Through such icons, many miracles,

including the healing of sick people, victory in battle, and safety in the face of catastrophe, have been affected by God's power. The character of Orthodox icons is dictated by theological, metaphysical and psychological principles that underlie their veneration. These principles have been pointed out by the Church Fathers and were given classical expression by St. John of Damascus in the 8<sup>th</sup> century in his treatise *Against those who decry the holy icons* (P.G. 94). To reject the icon of Christ is to reject His Incarnation; to venerate it is to affirm His Incarnation. Icons teach and remind us and are thus concise memorials of what is written in the Holy Scriptures and sacred history. More importantly, they allow us to recall truths. Depending on a believer's level of spirituality and disposition, icons can raise one to a greater or lesser experience of spiritual reality.

The *iconostasis* (icon screen), which is found in Orthodox churches, demonstrates the unity of the faithful with Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, angels and the saints. The icons bear witness to the presence of Christ and the Good News. They serve as visual witnesses to the fact that believers are also partakers in the "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9) and that they are also blessed to "eat bread in the Kingdom of God" (Luke 14:15). There are also icons or frescoes on the walls and ceilings, but the most prominent one is that of Jesus Christ *Pantocrator* (the Almighty) in the centre of the building usually in the dome. Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware states:

Orthodox churches are full of icons on the screen, on the walls, in special shrines, or on a kind of desk where they can be venerated by the faithful. When Orthodox people enter a church, their first action will be to buy a candle, go up to an icon, cross themselves, kiss the icon, and light the candle in front of it (Ware 1979:10).

When one visits an Orthodox Church, one is immediately struck by the sight of icons and the veneration that is afforded to them. For non-Orthodox believers, this appears somewhat strange and perplexing (Ware 1979:271). The Orthodox Church believes that icons are a meeting point between heaven and earth, and that taken together they form an image of God's Kingdom. When in the church, almost enveloped by iconography, believers have a sense of "heaven on earth" (Ware 1979:272). This scenario dates back to the time of the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (307-337 A.D.) to Christianity.

The Orthodox Church emphasises that man is created in the image of God. In every service or act of worship, Orthodox priests offer incense to every one of the faithful present, in the same way as incense is offered to the icons in the Church. The Divine Liturgy itself is, in essence, a living icon of the heavenly mystery of the Kingdom of God. Orthodox Church

buildings are an image of the Church, representing both what is on earth and what is in the heavens and beyond. The narthex of the Church is akin to the earth, the nave to the heavens, and the sanctuary to that which is higher than the heavens (P.G. 155:292A, 337D-340). Icons are signs of the invisible presence of God throughout human history. They serve as a guide to believers to a vision of the Divine Kingdom, the New Jerusalem, in which the past, present and future exist. They are gateways to a spiritual dimension, which will ultimately be revealed in its fullness at the “Δευτέρα Παρουσία” (Second Coming). As human beings are not perfect, they require aids such as icons, chants, etc. if they are to win the struggle of the soul, mind and body and arrive at divinisation. In the context of perfected faith, icons are not required and individuals must strive for pure prayer, which makes direct contact with the Holy Spirit. The Person of Jesus Christ that icons represent is the same throughout and icons represent saints at the final stage of *Theosis* or union with God:

that is why iconographers are interested in portraying not the physical characteristics of the particular saint but the spiritual essence of the theosized or God-realised person (Markides 2002:).

### 3. THE SEVENTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

It was Constantine the Great who promoted the rise of Christianity and the demise of paganism by forbidding idolatry to an extent. Under his authority, many statues of the pagan pantheon of gods were removed and icons were henceforth used to decorate churches and all state buildings in Constantinople and beyond. The Orthodox Patriarch Cyril I of Alexandria (404-444 A.D.), also known as Kyrillos the Pillar of Faith, allowed icons to adorn churches in the Patriarchate in Egypt. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Basil the Great bore witness to the practice of icon painting (Blomfield *et al.* 1997) and encouraged the use of icons. As a result, icons were gradually incorporated into the worship of the Orthodox Church, ultimately leading to their acceptance in the last two of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. In the Orthodox Church, we place great emphasis on the adoration of the *Theotokos* and various other holy men and women and especially icons of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the saints and martyrs. Approximately twelve centuries ago, a group called the “Iconoclasts” challenged the Church’s devotion to icons and her invocation of the saints. Those who were against the use of icons were called Iconoclasts, and those who promoted the use of icons were called Iconodules.

As icon usage spread in the centuries after the Emperor Constantine, Christians began to use icons in ways that were never intended, and

became more concerned with the artwork itself rather than its use as an aid for prayer and Christian instruction. Unfortunately, icons were venerated as being something holy by themselves. Consequently, a large movement began in the 7<sup>th</sup> century that endeavoured to eliminate the use of icons from churches. Their argument was that they were being worshipped as graven images based on the Biblical verse:

Thou should not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in the earth beneath, or that in the water under the earth, thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them (Ex. 20:4-5).

Many icons were destroyed during this period, which became known as the Iconoclast (icons-destruction) controversy. This resulted in the Seventh Ecumenical Council of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Nicaea in 787 A.D. The two major theologians who took a stand for the use of icons in the Church were St. John of Damascus (675-749 A.D.) and St. Theodore of Studios (759-826 A.D.) who was most active towards the end of the Iconoclastic controversy. He was an ardent defender of the *Iconodules*. The *Iconodules* supported the idea that pagans could be “shown” the faith by introducing them to icons (P.G. 95:325C, John of Damascus, De Compt. Nat. 3). They also believed that icons serve to safeguard the doctrine of the Incarnation, which made it possible to have a religious art that is representational. Simply put, God can be depicted, since He became man and assumed human form. The *Iconoclasts* were at odds with this reasoning, as they wanted religion to be free from material things such as icons.

Theologically speaking, there was also a great divergence between the *Iconoclasts* and the *Iconodules*. The former emphasised the nature of God and the latter focused on the hypostasis, i.e. the person of the incarnated Word. St. Theodore the Studite stated: “Every image is the image of an hypostasis, and never of a nature” (P.G. 99:405A). From this vantage point, icons are purely historical pictures depicting actual events and personalities that are linked with the Incarnation. The Fathers assembled at the Seventh Council commenced by distinguishing the attitude of believers toward God from that toward icons or saints. They used two different Greek words to name human sentiments towards icons. These were “λατρείαν” (worship) and “προσκύνησιν” (veneration). The latter was considered to be suitable towards the Virgin Mary (Θεοτόκος), the angels, the saints and other pious people. They concluded that *latreia* (“worship”) was due only to God, but that *proskynesis* (“veneration”) could be paid to all created things. They illustrated this distinction from a literal reading of Matthew 4:10: “You shall venerate (*proskynesis*) the Lord your God, and Him only shall you worship



(*latreuseis*.)” What is veneration? Webster’s Dictionary defines “venerate” as to “regard with reverence”. In other words, we can venerate something from a distance, and do not need to actually touch it. Therefore, simply having icons confirms their veneration and they have a use beyond simple adornment. The creators of icons and the people who commissioned their production were prompted by piousness and respect to create icons of holy people.

The Holy Fathers took note that the Iconoclasts were simply ignoring this difference when, for example, they attacked the use of icons by referring to selected verses of Scripture, including the First Commandment (Ex. 20:4). The Fathers also brought to mind numerous passages in the Old Testament where God directed that images of angels be made (Ex. 25:18-20 and 26:1; 1 Kings 6:23-32) and where great honour was given to created beings, both earthly and heavenly (Num. 21:8-9; Heb. 11:21). St. Theodore the Studite (of Studios) summed up the Council’s stance:

Worship is unique and belongs to God alone; but other kinds of veneration belong to others. We venerate kings and rulers, servants venerate their masters, children their parents; but not as gods. Although veneration has the same outward form, it varies in intention. For these are human beings, and receive respect according to the honour due them, whether by law, by fear, or by affection (P.G. 99).

Using the principle of *oikonomia* (Divine Economy), an icon of Jesus Christ, for example, testifies to the unity of His two natures and distinguishes between created and uncreated, and so the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council underlined the emergence of icons as the very hypostasis of the Logos in human form.

The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council did not stop there and sought to demonstrate that veneration of icons and honour paid to the saints were, in fact, the worship of the one true God, but in an additional form. They thus promoted the inspiration of St. Basil the Great, who lived four centuries earlier. He wrote: “The honor given to the image is transferred to its prototype.” He was basically stating that, when we honour a representation of something, we are essentially thinking about the person or thing that is represented and not the image in itself. Veneration of icons is thus very distinct from idolatry. Unlike the pagans who worshipped a pantheon of gods, Christians prayed to only the true God – the triune Godhead of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The pagans had no proper conception of God as the Creator, Who is Himself completely distinct from His creation. They concerned themselves with material representations and worshipped idols for their own. When using icons, Christians draw their minds and spirits upward to the God who is the

source of life and holiness. In his *Apologia against those who decry holy images*, St. Theodore of Studios explained that:

The mind does not remain with the materials, because it does not trust them: that is the error of the idolaters. Through the materials, rather, the mind ascends toward the prototypes: this is the faith of the Orthodox.<sup>2</sup>

All Iconoclasm was condemned, as it subverted the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The Logos or Word of God became man in order to repossess His creation and to reassert His Lordship. By venerating the icons and the saints, we thus honour God's great saving work of redeeming humanity. Iconoclasts failed to comprehend that icons do not represent either the one or the two natures of Christ. They are, to a certain extent, a representation of what is invisible through what is visible. In response to the iconoclasts, St. John of Damascus stated the following:

I do not venerate the creation over the Creator, but I venerate the Creator who became creation like me, and came down into creation without humiliation and without being debased, in order to glorify my nature and make me to be partaker of the divine nature .... For the nature of flesh has not become deity, but, as the Word became flesh without change, remaining as he was, likewise the flesh became Word, without losing what it is, identifying moreover with the Word hypostatically. Thus, taking courage, I represent God, the invisible, not as invisible, but insofar as he has become visible for us by participation in flesh and blood. I do not represent the invisible deity but I represent the flesh of God which has been seen (P.G. 94, 1236BC).

The Seventh Ecumenical Council finally provided the official authorisation for iconography to continue in opposition to the iconoclasts, but it was nonetheless cautious with the language and stipulations:

We, therefore, following the royal pathway and the divinely inspired authority of our Holy Fathers and the traditions of the Catholic Church (for, as we all know, the Holy Spirit indwells her), define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God, and on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on hangings and in pictures both in houses and by

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2 <http://www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/articles/article7116.asp-OrthodoxChristianity.net>. [February 2013].

the wayside, to wit, the figure of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, of our spotless Lady, the Mother of God, of the honourable Angels, of all Saints and of all pious people. For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honourable reverence, not indeed that true worship of faith which pertains alone to the divine nature; but to these, as to the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross and to the Book of the Gospels and to the other holy objects, incense and lights may be offered according to ancient pious custom. For the honour which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented. For thus the teaching of our holy Fathers, that is the tradition of the Catholic Church, which from one end of the earth to the other hath received the Gospel, is strengthened. Thus we follow Paul, who spake in Christ, and the whole divine Apostolic company and the holy Fathers, holding fast the traditions which we have received (Percival 1955:).

The Divine essence may not be depicted; only Jesus Christ, the *Theotokos*, the Angels, Saints, and pious people may be represented. The only Person of the Triune Godhead who could be depicted directly was Jesus Christ, the *Logos*, who became flesh. This was permitted, since Jesus is the only one who revealed an Image of Himself to humanity as the incarnated Word of God. In addition, critically, the veneration afforded to icons is not the same as the worship of the Divine nature.

Although Eusebius of Caesaria (275-339) opposed images of the apostles and Christ, icons are biblically justified in the creation of man which is analogous to the divine image since man is created: "in the image of God" and "after his likeness" (Gen. 1:26-7). Consequently, since man was created in the image of God and is thus a mirror of divine splendour, it follows that God made human nature a partaker of every good thing. God is perfect, and He created man according to His image and has thus communicated to man His goodness, which is represented in a multiplicity of ways including, *inter alia*, liberty, wisdom, justice, love and immortality (Gregory of Nyssa, P.G. 44:184A-D). The Holy Gospel affirms that Jesus Christ, having taken a physical Body, sanctified matter and it becomes a way in which we can know Him more. This demonstrates to us the lives of men and women who were transfigured and illumined by the power of the incarnate *Logos*, Jesus Christ. The same men and women depicted in icons are thus other models of the Christian life and serve as intercessors before the Lord. In essence, as icons direct us towards God, they become conduits through which His grace can flow into believers. By honouring

them, we honour the Lord Jesus Christ and show our appreciation for all that Jesus does for us. Christ is consubstantial with humanity – He has the exact same nature as do all people, but He is also inwardly united with us and we live a new life in Him.

Icons are understood as a bequest of the Incarnation and allow theologising due to the Son incarnate. The objective of the Incarnation of the Son of God was to give perfect being to humanity, but also to free it from evil. Only God could achieve this, since a sinner is a sinner and is unable to free himself from evil. In Exodus 20:4, we read: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing”. During the Old Testament period, therefore, any depiction of God in any form was considered anathema. St. John of Damascus observed that:

In times past, God, without body and form, could in no way be represented. But now, since God has appeared in flesh and lived among men, I can depict that which is visible of God. I do not venerate the matter, but I venerate the Creator of matter, who became matter for me, who condescended to live in matter, and who, through matter accomplished my salvation; and I do not cease to respect the matter through which my salvation is accomplished (P.G. 94:1245AB).

Evdokimov (1965) maintains that, through the grace of Jesus Christ, matter is assumed and sanctified and the mystery of divine economy clearly eradicates any dualism between the spirit and matter – and so icons become sanctified objects. In the divinity of Jesus Christ, the Logos is the consubstantial image of the Father and, in His humanity, we find the image of God. In His humanity, He thus reveals the image of the authentic man. This is obvious even though we cannot distinguish between the two natures in Christ. In Jesus Christ, we thus find the affirmation of matter, which becomes the means of Divine Energy and Grace (P.G. 94:1300B, John of Damascus, Epositio Orth. Fidei). The pagans used matter as an object of worship; however, Jesus Christ freed humanity from the bondage of idolatry by revealing Himself, with His dual nature of man and God, as the true image of God the Father (Col. 1:15; John 14:9). In Jesus, we see revealed the new world of existence and the perfect ideals of life and ascend to heaven as our souls are resurrected from evil. Why can we not have depictions of Him and other pious people?

In Orthodoxy, the Bible is thus a verbal icon of Christ:

[T]he seventh Ecumenical Council laying down that the Holy Icons and the Book of the Gospels should be venerated in the same way. ... Because she or he is an icon of God, each member of the

human race, even the most sinful, is infinitely precious in God's sight (Ware 1997:256).

Icons depicting holy personages and events were displayed and venerated in Christian churches for approximately 700 years before they were opposed. In 730, the Byzantine Emperor Leo III decreed the forbidding of veneration of icons and ordered the removal of an icon depicting Christ, which had hung over one of the gates of the city of Constantinople. Only the Holy Cross could be venerated (Treadgold 2000). This move led to outrage across the Empire and even the Patriarch of Constantinople, St. Germanos I (645-740) resigned his position. The Pope of Rome, St. Gregory III, condemned the actions of St. Germanos I. This resulted in a century filled with tension and discontent. The commonly given reason for the chaotic situation was the *iconoclastic* interpretation of the Second Commandment (Ex. 20:4-6; Deut. 5:8-10). The veneration of icons obtained official approval at the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the Second Council of Nicaea (A.D. 787); the Orthodox position on icons has remained unchanged since then (Percival *et al.* 1997). In A.D. 843, the Empress Theodora reinstated icons as part of worship. When Orthodoxy depicts Jesus Christ in His human form, it does regard the depiction as distinct from the divinity that is also within Him. The human form is indeed deified and the two aspects comprise one God "Equal to God" (*omotheon*). This sentiment is also expressed by Gregory the Theologian:

And just as when one paints the picture of a man he does not depict him without his soul, but rather he who is depicted remains with his soul ... so, too, when making the icon of the Lord, we confess his flesh to be deified and we understand his icon as nothing else but an icon showing the imitation of the prototype (Mansi 13:344AB).<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to note that iconoclasts always border on reducing the Incarnation to a less important aspect of theology and consequently bring themselves ponderously close to docetism. They essentially deny Jesus' manifestation as both God and man. God the Word became man in order to save our bodies and our souls, and this is a fundamental teaching of Christianity. Icons are vital in preserving basic doctrines of Christianity and Christology. Many icons work miracles, but only in the presence of deep faith. A divine element enters the icon from its creation and Divine Grace and energy give it miraculous power. Theodore the Studite explained that God is omnipresent: "both in rational and irrational beings, both in the animate and inanimate" (P.G. 99:344B-C). St. John of Damascus writes: "In their lifetime the saints were filled with the Holy Spirit; and after their death, too, the grace of the Holy Spirit abides always in their souls, and in their

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3 *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima colectio.*

bodies and tombs, and also in their forms and holy icons, not in essence, but as grace and energy” (P.G. 94:1249C-D). God is then present in an icon but not in a: “... natural union, only by way of relative participation, the icon partakes of honour and grace” (P.G. 99:961).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

When reverence is shown to an icon, this should be done with the understanding that it is not the icon in itself that we are respecting, but rather the person or event it depicts. An icon is thus a window into the spiritual dimension, and should be used to help us contemplate spiritual issues. It is intended to lead us into a state of prayer and serves as a reminder of events in the Holy Bible, the life of Jesus Christ and the Saints. It is not an object to be worshipped. When Orthodox believers see an icon of our Lord, or of the Virgin Mary, for example, they are moved, because the icon recalls to them Christ’s love for humanity. Similarly, saints are venerated because God’s image is reflected in them. There is a recognition that it is through the grace of Our Lord that they performed miracles and were guided by the Paraclete.

Icons have a profound theological significance and are in themselves theology, anticipated to bring man closer to God. This idea transcends any words and concepts. In present-day Orthodoxy, iconography bears witness to the reality of the presence of God with believers in the mystery of the faith. To view icons as a tool for understanding the world of Christianity and thus God is indeed a very liberating idea. We do not live in a naturalistic world where important divine interaction is impossible. Christ became truly man and as such was truly the “icon of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15; II Cor. 4:4). This essentially means that we do not live in a classical Greek Platonic world of “shadows”. In this world, human experience, which we take to be real, is essentially only a shadow world, whereas the “real world” is the world of Ideas, which we arrive at intuitively. We do not need to flee from such a world in order to discern what God is doing for us. It means that we live in a world where everything that happens is a sacrament that demonstrates the glory of God. If we repudiate the image of the Lord, we are basically denying the great mystery of incarnation. The icons are not simply a visual gospel or aids to prayer and contemplation in daily life, but are rather witnesses to the presence of God’s Kingdom in the Church. Icons are a visual representation of the entire history of humanity and are required in a spiritual sense, since “the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us” (John 1:14). We are not in a Kantian world of experience of “phenomena” that prevent us from accessing fundamental realities or even underlying basic realities or “noumena”. The creation of man in the

image of God, and his recreation in Christ as well as his transfiguration and his ultimate glory are all, symbolically, present in icons. Icons evoke a feeling of repentance and compunction in believers and encourage prayer. They depict the transcendent sanctity that permeates Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Angels and the Saints. In Orthodoxy, Saints are commemorated daily. The *Kontakion* a specific type of hymn, is used in the Orthodox Church to commemorate a Saint or feast. An important feast day is the Feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, which is celebrated on the first Sunday of Great Lent. This commemorates the restoration of the Holy Icons to the Churches after the iconoclastic argument, and concisely summarises the Orthodox arguments against the docetism of the iconoclasts:

No one could describe the Word of the Father; but when He took flesh from you, O Theotokos, He accepted to be described, and restored the fallen image to its former beauty. We confess and proclaim our salvation in word and images (OCA).

Icons communicate in a unique way of God and of men who can be transformed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. All icons are, in a sense, miraculous in that they portray one Person, namely God, and miracles are possible through the Grace of the *Paraclete* and the Grace of Jesus Christ. Icons do not perform miracles, but the Grace of the Holy Spirit allows the person depicted to cause a miracle to happen to someone who is, for example, ill, but has such deep faith that he will be healed. Christ is the one who manifests miracles.

Icons and their prototypes have a close relationship, in that the icons are not merely depictions of the past, but are current witnesses of a life of holiness and as such are important in Christianity. Just as water is used in Baptism and wine in Holy Communion, so, too, wood and paint are used in holy iconography to help us share in the Heavenly Kingdom. Icons are a window to heaven and reminders of the spiritual world of which we are part. They depict sacred realities in the course of human history and it is natural to venerate them. The iconographic tradition we follow at present has a profound and deep history and is important to Orthodox believers.

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