Byzantine Iconoclasm and the Defenders of Icons, John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite

Iakovos Menelaou

In Orthodoxy an icon is the image of a person who has been characterized by holiness, possessed of the Holy Spirit, and the recipient of the total restoration of God’s image through baptism.¹ In the fourth century, when Christianity was established as the official religion of the Byzantine Empire, the creation of the first great works of Christian art took place.² Although the use of icons can be confirmed in that century, the earliest surviving icons only go back to the sixth century.³ It is interesting to note that the origins of icons are associated with paganism, since pagan images were the model for Christian iconography and the same verbal terms

³ Ibid., p. 100.
were employed for both.\textsuperscript{4} However, the meaning of Christian icons is completely different from that of pagan images. Christian iconography made use of its own environment’s forms, giving icons a totally new meaning,\textsuperscript{5} which it obtained from the Scriptures, \textit{martyrologia}, and the lives of the saints. These sources infused Christian art with a new and unique character.\textsuperscript{6}

From its earliest beginnings, iconography has always played an important role in the Eastern Orthodox Church. There is no Eastern Orthodox Church or household without icons. Through icons, the Orthodox communicate with departed saints, who serve as intercessors between the ones praying and the triune God.\textsuperscript{7} Nonetheless, there was a period in Byzantine history when icons were banned and people who venerated them were persecuted. This is the era of Iconoclasm, which lasted more than a century.

\textbf{The Icon controversy of the 8\textsuperscript{th} and 9\textsuperscript{th} centuries}

The first emperor to oppose icons was Leo III (r.717-741). In 726 and 730 he promulgated two decrees against the veneration of icons, which ignited the persecution of iconodules. His decision to remove the icon of the Savior, which had been placed above the gate of the imperial palace many years before his reign, was the beginning of a great battle against icons.\textsuperscript{8} In place of the image of the Savior, Leo III erected a cross, which according to the iconoclasts was Christianity's most powerful symbol.\textsuperscript{9} While it may be said that Leo was the leader of the iconoclastic movement, his son, Constantine V (741-775), was certainly the most

\textsuperscript{7} Herrin, \textit{Byzantium}, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{9} Herrin, \textit{Byzantium}, p. 109.
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violent persecutor of iconodules and the leader of the iconoclastic theology. Constantine wrote a treatise that summarized iconoclastic doctrine and convoked a church council at Hieria in 754.\textsuperscript{10} He was succeeded by his son, Leo IV (r775-780). Upon his death, Leo IV’s wife, Irene of Athens, ruled as a dowager and regent from 780 to 797, and from 797 to 802 as empress. She called the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which was held in Nicaea in 787. It was this council that achieved the restoration of icons.\textsuperscript{11}

However, the battle against icons did not end since a series of iconoclastic emperors followed Irene’s reign. Leo V the Armenian (813-820), Michael II (821), and Theophilos (822-848) disrupted the life of the church over the use of icons until Theodora, who succeeded Theophilos in 842, permanently restored the veneration of icons.\textsuperscript{12} The Sunday on which images were reinstated became known as the Feast of Orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{13} Theodora commissioned Methodios to write a new liturgy. His \textit{Synodikon of Orthodoxy} was a landmark in the return of traditional belief. In March 878 Theodora reaffirmed the decision of the Council of 787, which had originally restored the use of icons. Consequently, over a century of conflict came to an end with complete victory for those who favored the veneration of icons.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Iconoclasts versus Iconodules: The debate}

It is not clear why Leo III initiated the attack on icons or why his successors followed his policy. However, some historians observe that the veneration of icons was seen as a form of idolatry for which Christians were mocked by Jews and Muslims.\textsuperscript{15} Some

\begin{enumerate}
\item Metropolitan Bossakov, ‘The Iconoclastic Controversy-Historical Perspectives’, p. 218.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 218.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 220.
\item Herrin, \textit{Byzantium}, p. 112.
\item \textit{Κωνσταντίνος Παπαρρηγόπουλος}, \textit{Το έπος της Εικονομαχίας} (Athens, 2005), pp. 40-41, 42-43.
\end{enumerate}
misunderstood the role of icons, failing to distinguish between the object and the person it depicted. Others rejected the notion that veneration could under any circumstances be given either to the icon or the person it represented. Curiously, one reason Leo decided to destroy icons was the eruption of a great volcano that his counselors had advised was a divine warning against idolatry.\(^{16}\)

The crux of the controversy was whether Christ can be depicted. Iconoclasts maintained that he could not while iconodules asserted that he could.\(^{17}\) Iconoclasm called into question the veneration of icons that had been formally accepted at least since the Council of Nicaea in 325. The resulting conflict caused the greatest rift in the history of the Church in the East.\(^{18}\)

Iconoclasts accused iconodules of idolatry and of breaking the Second Commandment: "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them…" (Exodus 20:4-5, NIV).\(^{19}\) This passage from Holy Scripture, which prohibits the making of idols, is the cornerstone of their views. Iconoclasts also focus on the tradition of the Holy Fathers in order to demonstrate that the veneration of icons has no patristic validity. They refer especially to the writings of Saint Epiphanius of Cyprus (an apocryphal writing), Theodotos of Ankyra (an interpolated text), and also isolated sentences of others like Saint Gregory the Theologian and Saint Basil the Great.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{16}\) Herrin, *Byzantium*, p. 108.


\(^{19}\) Herrin, *Byzantium*, p. 105.

According to iconoclasts, the use of icons is reminiscent of older representations of pagan gods, since Christian icons were adored in a way that could easily be characterized as neo-pagan behavior. In this view, those who venerate icons are heretics who are aping pagan customs. For them the representation of Christ in an image is not appropriate because it goes against a fundamental dogma of Christianity that God – even God in the incarnate Christ – cannot be depicted. Iconoclasts believe in the Church as an invisible body.

Constantine V, the emperor who attacked icons more strenuously than any other before or after him, claimed that the justification for the use of icons revolved around the icon of Christ. If Christ cannot be depicted, then there is no other icon with theological validity. For Constantine an icon that depicted Christ was not really an icon of Christ since Christ has two natures. Thus, an icon of Christ separates the human from the divine nature or even confuses them as one. This is the main argument that shook the Church to its roots.

In the sixth and seventh centuries, icons and their worship were widespread. Icons were displayed in the Hippodrome and appeared in battles at the head of armies; Heraclius carried the acheiropoetic image on his expeditions, and the freeing of Thessalonians from the Slavs was seen as a result of the intervention of Saint Demetrius. Icons could be found in a wide range of plac-

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es, including bedrooms, shops, households, and books.\textsuperscript{28} Some people believed that icons could speak and shed tears, suggesting that their convictions about icons exceeded those normally associated with mere veneration. Iconodules even believed that some icons had been made by divine, not human, hands.\textsuperscript{29} It was within this context that the first iconoclastic emperors took measures against icons.\textsuperscript{30} And it was certainly under these circumstances that Constantine Kopronymos saw iconodules as a threat to be treated violently.\textsuperscript{31}

Iconoclasts saw themselves as reinstating the traditional beliefs of Christian Byzantium by eliminating idolatry. Their policy against icons was a purification of the corruption of the Church, a return to its roots and the earliest tradition.\textsuperscript{32} The insistence on the biblical prohibition on graven images was always the core of their bellicose intentions.\textsuperscript{33} Iconoclasts proclaim the immeasurable distance between the "abject, dead matter" of material things like paint and wood and the immaterial nature of the true Church.\textsuperscript{34} Constantine considered icons as a form of heresy and maintained that Christ’s double nature is inseparable; therefore, it is impossible to depict Christ. He also claimed that iconodules fall into two heresies: Nestorianism when they represent only the human hypostasis of Christ, and Monophysitism when they represent only the divine nature of Christ.\textsuperscript{35}

Iconoclasts believe that the making of icons is an effort to confine and subscribe the divinity of Christ, which remains inaccessible. Iconodules, on the other hand, declare that the Word had revealed itself in an accessible and visible form to human eyes by

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{29} Πανσέληνος, \textit{Βυζαντινή Ζωγραφική}, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{30} Besancon, \textit{The Forbidden Image}, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{31} Sahas, \textit{Icon and Logos}, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{32} Besancon, \textit{The Forbidden Image}, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 124.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 125.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 125-6.
becoming flesh. An image is identical to the prototype (Christ),
despite physical differences. The beauty of the image is the same
as the beauty of the prototype. Also, the beauty of Christ is the
same as that of the Father, with the difference that in Christ this
beauty appears in a human form. According to iconodules, God’s
image is fully restored in Christ’s human nature, but it re-
ains invisible and indescribable. What is describable in Christ is
the nature He received from His mother; His human nature. But
His divinity remains always invisible. Thus, to the question of
whether or not Christ is circumscribable, the answer from icono-
dules is that He can indeed be portrayed, as He was born of
Mary.

The value of an icon does not derive from the icon itself, but
its use. An icon is the manifestation of the mystery of the Chris-
tian salvation that brings the faithful close to the archetype. Thus,
although icons are made of the same material as idols, they
are sacred, honorable, and glorious because their holiness comes
from God’s grace and not from the material they are made of. An
icon has a didactic aim and becomes the functional equiva-
lent of a book for illiterate people. Moreover, an icon holds the
energy of the person who is depicted; hence an icon is like a sa-
crament. It is an artificial image, an imitation of the prototype.

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36 Ibid., pp. 115-7.
38 Nikolau, ‘The Place of the Icon in the Liturgical Life of the Orthodox
Church’, p. 320.
39 Ibid., p. 322.
40 Tschiflianov, ‘The Iconoclastic Controversy-A Theological Perspe-
tive’, p. 252.
41 Ibid., p. 234.
42 Nikolau, ‘The Place of the Icon in the Liturgical Life of the Orthodox
Church’, pp. 323-4.
43 Besancon, The Forbidden Image, p. 128.
44 Ibid., p. 129.
John of Damascus

John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite were the two major defenders of icons during the period of Iconoclasm; the former during the first iconoclastic period and the latter during the second iconoclastic period.

John maintained that an icon is like the light and rays of the sun, or the bloom and fragrance of a rose. He believed that human beings always need corporeal things to act as intermediaries and to bring them close to spiritual things. An image is hierarchized depending on its degree of participation in the prototype. Thus, an icon is at the very bottom of the hierarchy. There is no distinction between a natural image, which participates directly with the substance of a prototype, and an artificial image, which does no more than imitate the prototype. This is the framework that John used to justify icons. He also made a distinction between latria, which is the worship reserved for God, and proskynesis, which is the veneration appropriate for sacred things.  

In John’s teaching, real worship is addressed only to God. An icon, which stands between the one who prays and the depicted person, is the matter through which humans can communicate with God. It is a sacred thing because it provides the faithful with the opportunity to come closer to God. According to John, an icon directs people to abstract realities:

I do not venerate matter, but rather the creator of matter, who was made matter for me and who deigned to live in matter and bring about my salvation through matter. I will not cease to venerate the matter through which salvation came to me.

There are three main points in John’s doctrine of icons. The first one is that God made humankind in His image and likeness. Con-

46 Ibid., p. 127.
sequently, the first to make images was God, for God made humans as images of himself. The second point is the surmise that images constitute a prominent feature of reality, both the reality of God and the reality of the world that He has created. And finally, his third point is that images should be seen as a fundamental element of Orthodoxy since they are justified by the incarnation of God in a human form. In any case, the decision to ban icons is an error because this denies the meaning of creation in which God formed human beings in His image, and it eliminates the possibility for people to come closer to God through the material creation.

John wrote *On the Divine Images* to protect icons. Although this work consists of three different texts, they are in fact three different versions of the same defense of the veneration of icons. John attempts to show that the part of Old Testament that rejects idolatry has nothing to do with Christian icons. This prohibition relates to the veneration of objects of the creation (the very definition of idolatry) instead of the Creator. John also observed that, although the Old Testament clearly denounces the error of idolatry, its denunciations are mainly addressed to Jews, who were prone to it. While idolatry as depicted in the Old Testament was the work of the devil, Christian icons do not fall into the error of idolatry because the incarnation justifies their existence.

John clearly distinguishes between appropriate and idolatrous images:

If we were to make images of human beings and regard them and venerate them as gods, we would be truly sacrilegious. But we do none of these things… For the image

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47 Andrew Louth, “‘Beauty will save the World’: the Formation of Byzantine Spirituality”, *Theology Today* 61, 2004, pp. 73-75.

is a mirror and a puzzle, suitable to the destiny of our body.\textsuperscript{49}

**Theodore the Studite**

Theodore the Studite has been characterized as the great apologist of Orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{50} As the main defender of icons during the second iconoclastic period, his name is associated with the permanent restoration of icons. Like John of Damascus, Theodore used Neoplatonic philosophy to justify his claims. According to him, the respect that the faithful show to icons is not addressed to the materials of which icons are made, but to the person depicted. So, icons become a means for people to communicate with Christ and the saints.\textsuperscript{51}

In Theodore’s view, what we see in icons is the very person; his *hypostasis*, not his nature. What an icon represents is the man with his various properties – those things that are specific to that individual. He also maintains that although Christ is one thing and His icon another, the icon has the "same hypostasis" as Christ since there is an undivided identity shared by the two. It should be concluded therefore that, although an icon of Christ consists of wood and paint, it should be addressed as Christ because of the identity it shares with its archetype.\textsuperscript{52}

Theodore refers to the episode when Gabriel visited Mary, telling her: "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus." This event illustrates that Christ is called by a common noun and proper name. Christ is separated by His *hypostatic* properties from the rest of men; thus He is circumscribable. Christ is an individual and one like us,


\textsuperscript{51} Πανσέληνου, *Βυζαντινή Ζωγραφική*, p. 102.

\textsuperscript{52} Besancon, *The Forbidden Image*, p. 131.
while also being God and one member of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{53} Theodore asks: "If Christ is not circumscribable, how can He say that He gave His back to the smitters and His cheek to those who pulled out the beard; or how can He say that they have pierced His hands and feet?"\textsuperscript{54} Theodore uses Christ’s passion as a means to show that Christ is indeed describable. Although He is God, Christ is one of us because He suffered and felt pain like any human being. An icon can portray His hypostasis because Christ is differentiated from all others of the same species by His own properties.\textsuperscript{55}

Theodore also observes that Christ is identical to His father in respect to divinity and identical to His mother in respect to humanity. By mixing the properties of each origin, iconoclasts fail to distinguish the human and divine natures of Christ. As a result, they cannot understand why Christ can be depicted.\textsuperscript{56}

In addition, Theodore says that an icon deserves the same kind of veneration as the prototype, in accordance with the identity of likeness. So, when we venerate an icon, we do not introduce a different kind of veneration from the veneration addressed to the prototype.\textsuperscript{57}

In his \textit{Refutations of the Iconoclasts}, Theodore responds to iconoclasts’ preaching that Christ is not describable, as follows:

You should consider that He [Christ] remains indescribable, although He has been described; there are attributes of His divine nature which demonstrate that He is God. But His other attributes belong to His human nature which illustrate that He is man…

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 88.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 90-91.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 100.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 103.
Christ is describable, although He is not a simple man, because He is not a man among many others, but God who became human…

So, He is describable and indescribable; the first one in accordance with His human nature and the second one in accordance with His divine nature…

In regard to the accusation of iconoclasts that icons are idols, Theodore affirms icons by observing that there is a great difference between icons and idols. On the one hand, icons are a source of light, part of the divine economy, and real. On the other hand, idols are a source of darkness and falsehood, and they introduce a multitude of Gods.

According to Theodore:

The material of an icon is not venerated, because it is not venerable. It is the person who is depicted in accordance with the prototype that deserves veneration. We do not venerate material, but the prototype together with its shape, without any confusion of the material…

The veneration of Christ through His icon concerns the divine economy, since Christ has human flesh, although He is God…

Thus, what we have in an icon of Christ is His human nature, which has specific properties like any human being. Although He is God, Christ is circumscribed because He took human flesh and suffered as a human. This is obvious through His passion. The veneration of icons is idolatry since it does not introduce a diversity of gods, as idolatry suggests.

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60 Ibid., p. 73.
Icons as Sacred Art

The production of an icon presupposes some very basic and strict rules. It can only be produced in the manner prescribed by the immutable law and holy tradition of the Ecumenical Church. Hence, it could never be said that the creation of an icon is due to an artist's inspiration. Icon painters, who are above the laity in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, are supposed to strive for humility, purity, and piety. To this end they seek closeness with the Father above through the spiritual practices of fasting and prayer while eschewing envy, alcoholic beverages, and practices that might lead to sin.

An icon should not be treated as a fossilized piece of art since artistry is only a secondary aspect of its nature. This is why a museum will never be a natural place for an icon. In the Orthodox Church, iconography does not have a primarily decorative purpose but, rather, is intended for a liturgical and worshipful purpose. An icon fulfils its purpose only when it leads the worshipers' consciousnesses into the spiritual realm where they may behold "mysterious and supernatural visions." If an icon does not obtain this goal, it fails to be an icon. Thus, iconography is not similar to other types of art and should be characterized as sacred art.

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63 Ibid., p. 79.
64 Florensky, Iconostasis, p.78.
65 Ibid., p. 90.
66 Ibid., p. 92.
An icon is narrative in shapes and forms, since it takes its themes from the Orthodox tradition. It is interesting to note that an icon is called *historesis*, iconography is called *historia*, and the iconographer is called *historiographos*. Icons are a reminder and commentary of the Holy Scriptures.\(^{71}\) Icons are not made as objects of aesthetic admiration or study. An icon is a living grace, which corresponds to a definite concrete reality and living experience always alive in the Church.\(^{72}\) Also, an icon differs from art because of its role in the liturgy. An image celebrates, as does any Christological feast, the historical event, its inner meaning, and its eternal reenactment.\(^{73}\) Consequently, an icon can only be understood in relation to the organic whole of the Orthodox tradition, which explains the role of icons in Christian life. If an icon is separated from this organic whole, it ceases to be an icon.\(^{74}\) When viewed in its proper context, an icon conveys a structure of ideas, becoming a picture of the divine world order.\(^{75}\)

In iconography there are no limitations of the past, present, and future. In icons we glimpse eternity in divine events living now in the present.\(^{76}\) Icons continue to be made in the same way they were made many centuries ago, and their role is no different now than it was in the past. Icons are to be found in churches and private houses as a holy and powerful presence,\(^{77}\) a means of communion with and knowledge of God.\(^{78}\) Therefore, an icon is an expression of theological experience and faith in Christ. It can only be understood in combination with its theological and cultural context.\(^{79}\)

\(^{76}\) Kalokyris, ‘The Essence of Orthodox Iconography’, p.50.
\(^{77}\) Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, p.25.
\(^{78}\) Sahas, *Icon and Logos*, p. 10.
Conclusion

Heresy or not, Iconoclasm had immense credibility at the time because it had the support of a number of emperors and the full force of the state behind it. And it continues to be highly compelling today for much of the Christian world because of its clear biblical foundations and theological cogency. Unfortunately, what is known about the period of Iconoclasm mainly comes from iconodule literature, which tends to vilify the iconoclast emperors. Moreover, there are no iconoclastic texts, as they did not survive. Consequently what we know about the iconoclasts is derived from the writings of their opponents. Therefore, our knowledge is no doubt partial, skewed, and presented in the worst possible light. Consequently, continuing research needs to be made into this divisive but ever protean subject.

Bibliography


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80 The author of Nicetas’ life, Theosterictus, in Papadakis, ‘Hagiography in relation to the Iconoclasm’, p.173; although he strongly supports that Iconoclasm was a terrible heresy, he also admits that it was the unique which had royal authority.

81 Ibid., p.173.

82 Πανσέληνου, Βυζαντινή Ζωγραφική, p. 136.

83 Sahas, *Icon and Logos*, p. x.

84 Δόλκος in Στουδίτου, Λόγοι Αντιρρητικοί Κατά Εικονομάχων, p.42.


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Iakovos Menelaou is a doctoral candidate in the field of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies at King's College London.