The Iconoclastic Controversy

or

“Why Some Christians Hate [religious] Art”

Dr. Tim Ralston
Church of the Incarnation
Summer 2014
Meet John of Damascus
(John Damascene)
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a family of civil governors

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resigned to join Mar Saba Monastery (Jerusalem)

ordained a ‘hieromonk’

died December 4, 749 AD
Meet John of Damascus

A logician, musician, & apologist

- *Fountain of Knowledge/Wisdom* in 3 parts
  - Dialectic (basics of logic);
  - Concerning Heresy (an early refutation of Islam);
  - An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith
    (1st Eastern Christian Scholastic work)
- Against the Jacobites
- Against the Nestorians
- Dialogue against the Manichees
- Elementary Introduction into Dogmas
- On Right Thinking
- On the Faith, Against the Nestorians
- On the Two Wills in Christ (Against the Monothelites)
- On Dragons and Ghosts
- Letter on the Thrice-Holy Hymn
- Octoechos (the Church’s service book of eight tones)
- Sacred Parallels (dubious)
- **Apologetic Treatises against those Decrying the Holy Images** (3 responses to Leo III’s iconoclastic edicts)
First, Some General Arguments
Some General Points

• The State – even a so-called ‘Christian’ Emperor – has no right to violate the Bible’s order of church government by dictating theology to the church or enforcing its theological decisions.

• It’s inconsistent to advocate venerating a temporal image (the Emperor) and condemn venerating a spiritual image (Christ or the Saints).

• Church leaders must not dishonor Christ by dividing the church over such a minor issue.

• If some images are wrong, then all images must be destroyed.
Answering the Negatives
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The 10 Commandments prohibit making or worshipping any image or statue.

Exodus 20:1–21 (KJV); cf. Dt 5:8

4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or 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: 5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them...

BUT

God commanded the making of images – a brass snake, boils & mice, cherubim (Ark & Veil), temple decor – & He empowered the temple artisans to make them

So the prohibition must be qualified by the next verse – it condemns an image made to be worshipped (idol)
Answering the Negatives

People ‘venerating’ icons are worshipping them – just like pagans worshipping their idols!

**BUT**

Don’t mistake the honor given to an image as worship
- we ‘venerate’ icons (honor whom they represent)
  – the Bible has many examples of ‘veneration’ (honor) given to people and to God in His physical self-manifestations
- we do not ‘worship’ icons (give service as to God)
- A failure to venerate something (an icon) IS NOT the same as dishonoring the person it represents; BUT a failure to worship IS the same as rejection
- the 7th Council approves this distinction in terms
Answering the Negatives

If God cannot be seen, an image of Him can only misrepresent Him – and so teach heresy!

BUT

• We do not try to portray the invisible, only what God has made visible
• We only portray the unseen God by what He used in the Bible to represent Himself – Abraham’s 3 visitors, the voice/dove at Jesus’ baptism, Light/Wind/Fire,…
• God gave form to what could not be described to make it known and understood; so icons put what is incomprehensible into forms we can understand
Answering the Negatives

If Jesus is both human + divine & an image of Jesus can only show His humanity, an image of Jesus misrepresents Him and teaches error

**BUT**

- God in Jesus took on a physical form to represent Himself and His Deity was not always apparent; so an icon of Jesus does not need to portray His deity
- A human portrait cannot portray the invisible spirit/soul; so every human portrait misrepresents its object (& so teaches a heretical anthropology)
- An icon represents Jesus’ *person*, not His nature.
Answering the Negatives

The use of icons is not supported by the ancient Church Fathers – or at least the Fathers that we consulted.

**BUT**

- The Church Fathers’ statements concerning icons also deal with Holy days, Holy sites, and Holy relics – so arguments pro/con icons must apply to them all.
- The overwhelming tradition of the church supports the making and use of images.
- Most of the Church Fathers did not condemn icons *per se* – they condemned the inappropriate display or improper use of images.
Answering the Negatives

An image possesses one and the same nature with its original. Only the Bread and wine of the Eucharist share the same nature with Christ. Therefore, the only Christian icon of Christ is the Eucharist.

**BUT**

The premise is not valid – that an image of something does **NOT** possess the same nature as its original. Therefore, the argument/comparison is invalid.
Accentuating the Positives
“Education”

• God decreed the use of symbols (pillars, etc.) as teaching points for Israel; so icons serve as teaching vehicles for us – His Church

• Icons are the church’s tool to serve/teach the illiterate – just as books serve/teach the literate

• Old Testament corporeal symbols served as antitypes for spiritual realities; so icons serve as antitypes for their corresponding spiritual realities

• Just as words sanctify by the hearing, so images sanctify by the seeing
Accentuating the Positives

“Anthropology”

• If we are made in the image of God, are we not also icons of God?

• If we honor God, should we not also honor those who bear His image?

• If Christians are one with Christ, shouldn’t we honor images of saintly Christians with the same honor we give to images of Christ?
Accentuating the Positives

“Aesthetics”

• Hereafter icons will be *stylized* images so they teach clearly & aren’t abused/admired as ‘art’
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“Aesthetics”

• Hereafter icons will be stylized images so they teach clearly & aren’t admired/abused as ‘art’
Enjoying the Arts Today
If we are made in God’s image, then...

• we are designed to “create” and be “creative” – everyone is creative somehow

• we nurture God’s image in us by exercising our “creativity,” whether…
  …exercising our own creativity
  …enjoying others’ creativity
  …evaluating a creative process/product

• So art that honors God’s truth is ‘sacramental’ – faith-informed engagement helps us to better ‘know’ Him & reflect Him
The Spiritual Significance of Art

growth

reflection

perception

emotion

engagement
Only rarely can a man make a moral choice that rises higher than his vision of reality, his sensibility; and it is partly through aesthetic experience that he sharpens and deepens that sensibility. Therefore, aesthetic experience is actually the nourishment of the human capacity for moral choice.

...Christian virtues are reinforced rather than weakened by aesthetic experience. ...A Christian who is aesthetically aware will be a richer human being, and therefore a better Christian, than a Christian who is uninterested in beauty and insensitive to it.

If the arts are a reflection of God’s image in us and the arts work within us spiritually, then creativity can often elicit a deep emotional response in us.

Therefore, we must beware of...

- **artistic manipulation** – being influenced powerfully but unconsciously by an artist through the art’s arousal of our emotion.
- **artistic addiction** – enjoying art only for its emotional effect and striving after the experience.
- **artistic prejudice** – validating the art only because of its emotional effect on us.
Enjoying the Arts Today

The Spiritual *In*significance of Art

- prejudice
- addiction

- perception
- emotion
- engagement
Read More About It...
Three Treatises on the Divine Images

Andrew Louth

Popular Patristics Series
St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003
Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity

Robin Jensen

Fortress Press, 2005
The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm

Alain Besançon
(Trans. Jane Marie Todd)

University of Chicago Press, 2000