

The creation and use of artwork that depicted Christ, Mary, the Apostles or other saints was a controversial subject in the church at the end of the Roman Empire. The issue was only inflamed by the deteriorating centrality of authority in the church and the localization of religious and political authority. Patriarchs in the East, influenced by the presence of Islamic rulers, denounced the creation and use of icons.¹ Still, there were others who valued the long-standing tradition of icons in the Christian church and advocated for the continued use of representations of Christ, Mary, the Apostles and other saints.

The benefits of and justifications for icons, according to their advocates, were many. John of Damascus is among the strongest proponents. John of Damascus sees no contradiction in the idea of creating an image for the invisible God because, in Christ, God has been “clothed in flesh” and “therefore [we] venture to draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes through flesh and blood.”² Further, John asserts that the very imagining of God is equivalent to creating an image of God because God is incomprehensible and humans must reduce God to human terms in order to consider the divine attributes.³ When Christians venerate the images of Christ and the saints, therefore, there is an understanding that God is beyond the image. Nevertheless, the image teaches and inspires true faith.

“Again, things which have taken place are expressed by images for the remembrance

¹ EXCURSUS ON THE CONCILIABULUM STYLING ITSELF THE SEVENTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, BUT COMMONLY CALLED THE MOCK SYNOD OF CONSTANTINOPLE. AD 754, Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Vol. 5, 325.

² John of Damascus, *First Apology Against Those Who Attack Divine Images*, Part I

³ Ibid.

either of a wonder, or an honour, or dishonour, or good or evil, to help those who look upon it in after times that we may avoid evils and imitate goodness.”⁴

John also presents the Ark, Tabernacle and cherubim as examples of icons and images in the scriptures. In addition, images inspire worship by their appeal to the senses. “It is evident that they were not worshipped for themselves, but that people were led through them to remember past signs, and to the God of wonders. They were images to serve as recollections, not divine, but leading to divine things by divine power.”⁵ Not only do the images inspire worship, they motivate Christians to venerate those saints whose faith is worthy of imitation.⁶ Ultimately, John concludes that those who have truly come to know the saving image of God in Christ will not be able to turn their attention to the worship of false idols.

On the other side of the aisle, those who opposed images of Christ and other saints were vigilant in their opposition. “[The Emperor] exacted an oath against images from all the inhabitants of the empire. The monks refused with violent obstinacy, and Copronymus appears to have amused himself by treating them with ruthless harshness.”⁷ This is largely due to an effort to establish a more local religious and political authority. Their argument revolved around the position that the Godhead cannot be depicted, and therefore any effort to do so is idolatry.⁸ According to the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ EXCURSUS, W.M. Sinclair Smith and Wace, *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, sub voce Constantinus VI.

⁸ EPITOME OF THE DEFINITION OF THE ICONOCLASTIC CONCILIAbULUM, HELD IN CONSTANTINOPLE, A.D. 754.

THE DEFINITION OF THE HOLY, GREAT, AND ECUMENICAL SEVENTH SYNOD.

Iconoclastic Council of 754CE, “The only admissible figure of the humanity of Christ, however, is bread and wine in the holy Supper.”⁹

This debate rages on over the human ability to represent God through various media. In particular, representations of Mary and other saints often draw violent reproach from protestant clergy and informed laity. The argument today is similar in many ways, with a concern that those who venerate the saints will not have the will, the intellect or the faith to lift their gaze higher to God behind these saints. Still, the argument is convincing that persons who admire the faith and life of one who lived before them are not always guilty of idolatry. Rather, we look to that great cloud of witnesses as a constant reminder and motivator in the face of our many trials and temptations. Images of these ones are birthed out of the human necessity to keep close those in whom we find strength, comfort and support. Admittedly, there is sometimes a tendency for our gaze to become narrow and to fail to realize and remember God behind the image. Still, “Hatred of images, in the process of the strife, might become, as it did, a fanaticism, it could never become a religion. Iconoclasm might proscribe idolatry; but it had no power of kindling a purer faith.”¹⁰

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ EXCURSUS, Trench, *Ut supra*, 99.