Theology in Images†

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The origin, history and meaning of the icon (Greek — Icon; English — Image) and the role it plays in Christian life are little known or appreciated outside the Eastern Orthodox Churches. In fact, it is "much misunderstood".[1] Theological students in Protestant seminaries hear very little about the iconoclastic controversies of the 8th and 9th centuries and they hear equally little about the *Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787* that met at Nicea. *The Second Nicean Council of 787* was the last great council of the Undivided Church where the burning issue of the day, namely, the iconoclastic controversy (an iconoclast is one who breaks down or destroys images) was settled in favour of the iconodules (an iconodule is one who supports painting and veneration of images) because it rightly recognised that the iconoclastic controversy was really an extension of the Christological controversies of the 4th and 5th centuries. The Serampore syllabus for "The Person and Work of Christ" does not even mention the Seventh Ecumenical Council and in Church History just one course "The History of Christianity from 600 to 1517 A.D." when dealing with the history of the eastern part of the Roaman empire makes a passing reference to it by saying "The iconoclastic controversy and its outcome — Relevance for Christianity in India". We are not criticising here the excellent syllabi drawn up by distinguished scholars but only pointing out what we feel to be an important lacuna. The point is many students are unaware of the importance of this subject and the need of studying it.

Added to this is the fact that generally among Protestants there is a deep aversion to anything that smacks of "idolatry"— though idolatry and "veneration of icons" are quite different from each other. Bulgakov says, "In Protestantism, which perpetuates the tradition of the iconoclasts and where icons are limited to the picture of Christ, the veneration of icons is

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† *The title is a phrase used by Leonid Uspenskii, an Eastern Orthodox theologian in a work he wrote in French. Excerpts from this book (in English translation) and other works of Orthodox theologians are found in Kallistos Ware, "The Theology of the Icon: An Anthology" in* ***Eastern Churches Review*** *(Date, Number, etc. missing from the photocopy that came into my hands).*

often held to be idolatry. This is because of a refusal to study the problem and to discover the true meaning of the icons."[2] But no Protestant Christian, we guess, would have any objection to hang pictures of Christ in one's home. In fact, pictures depicting various scenes from the Gospels, Christ in Gethsemane, Christ being baptized, stilling the storm, the Last Supper and so on are common places in almost every Protestant home — pictures which Richard W. Taylor calls "Bazaar and Calendar pictures" and says that they often are "poor copies of popular western originals".[3] Protestants would, perhaps, have no objection to using "religious pictures representing evangelical events . . . for the purpose of teaching" and to remind the believers "of events in sacred history . . "[4] but anything beyond that would be met with stiff resistance. If it is suggested that the interior of our churches should be adorned with the icons of Christ, the Apostles and Saints and that veneration (not worship) could be paid to them then many would vehemently oppose it. It was perhaps the same kind of situation where the question "Whether visible images representing our Lord and the saints were permissible in Christian Churches" was raised that eventually led to the iconoclastic controversy at the beginning of the 8th century.[5]

Before we proceed futher we need to note that a full examination of the iconolastic controversy would require an analysis that goes beyond the doctrinal issues to the social, political and cultural concerns, impossible to attempt within the compass of this article. Even a discussion of the numerous doctrinal questions connected with this controversy would take us far beyond the scope of this article. So, all that is attempted is to clear some misconceptions and to see the theological significance of the icons.

The Chambers 20th Century Dictionary defines icon as "a figure : image ; a portrait, carved, painted, etc., : in the Greek Church a figure representing Christ, or a saint, in painting, mosaic, etc. (not sculpture)". The Seventh Ecumenical Council defines it as follows :

> We therefore . . . define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable 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 . . . 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.[6]

To put in in simple terms, icons are pictorial representations of our Lord, the holy Virgin Mary, the angels, the Apostles and the saints of the Chruch. But icons need not be portraits of just individual persons "but may include entire incidents in the life of Christ (icons of feast) and can express very complicated dogmatic matters (different icons of St. Sophia, the Holy Wisdom, 'cosmic' icons of the Virgin, etc)".[7] The distinction between a "true icon" and mural paintings and pictures is that a mural painting is for the "edification of the worshippers" whereas an icon is "not only a holy picture" but also "a place of the Gracious Presence" ; further, "It is the place of an appearance of Christ, of the Virgin, of the saints, of all those represented by the icon, hence it serves as a place of prayer for them" (i.e. the believers).[8] This is the reason why anyone visiting an Eastern Orthodox Church for the first time would find icons and mural paintings on the ceiling, the walls, the wooden panels and just about everywhere inside the church building. The Orthodox offer their prayers before the icons.

What has just been said above leads us to our next point, that is the veneration of icons. This needs some clarification because the controversy raged just on this point. The Sacred Nicean Council makes clear the distinction between veneration offered to icons and worship which we owe to God alone. The decree of the Council said, "To these (sc : the icons) should be given due salutation and honourable reverance, not indeed that true worship of faith which pertains alone to the divine nature", then in language reminiscent of St. Basil the Great it went on to say "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".[9] The introductory article to the decrees says that "the Council was most explicit in declaring that this was merely a veneration of honour and affection" and that "when then the Council defined that the worship of 'latria' was never given to any but God alone, *it cut off all possibility for idolatry, mariolatry, iconolatry or any other latry except 'theolatry'*;". It further adds "If therefore any of these other 'latries' exist or ever have existed, they exist or have existed not in accordance with but in defiance of, the decree of the Second Council of Nice".[10] Now, physical acts of respect and reverence have been practised among all peoples of the world from time immemorial such as bowing, kneeling, embracing and so on but these do not necessarily mean worshipping the person to whom respect is shown or that the acts have any religious value. As the introductory article says "the nod which the Quakers adopted out of protest to the bow of Christians was once the expression of divine worship to the most sacred idols"

and then adds "in the Eastern Church the priest only bows before the Lord believed to be present in the Holy Sacrament while he prostrates himself before the infidel Sultan".[11] We could go on and quote many more statements from the decrees of the Council but enough statements have been quoted to show that the Council clearly says that icons are not idols and anathematizes those who would confound icons with idols. An excerpt from *The Orthodox Confession of the Faith of the Catholic and Apostolic Church of the East* says "There is a great distinction between idols and images. For idols are the figments and inventions of men, . . . But an image is an representation of a true thing having a real existence in the world. Thus, for example, the image of our Saviour Jesus Christ, of the holy Virgin Mary and of all the saints".[12] What we have said so far should set at rest any misgiving in the minds of our people regarding veneration of icons.

Now we shall look at three specific groups who fomented the iconoclastic controversy.

Opposition to the icons came from Islam with which the eastern part of the empire was in touch around this time. Sahas writes "In solidarity with Judaism on this matter, Islam rejected images and representations of humans as idols, a distinction which the Quran did not make" and then in a footnote adds, "the Quran contains no direct prohibition of icons".[13] Commenting furhter, in the same footnote, Sahas writes, "Vasilier, *History of the Byzantine Empire I*, 255, has erroneously assumed that the Muslims were guided against the images by the words of Surah 5 : 90/92. In this passage the reference is clearly to idols".[14]

Jews and those Christians who were iconoclasts formed the other two groups and both groups appealed to the Old Testament with its prohibition "You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness of anything . . ." (Ex. 20:4). Routley says that everything depended on how one interpreted the commandment whether as saying "You may make an image but you must not worship it" or "You must not make an image because if you do you will be unable to help worshipping it" and then adds that the "Old Testament mind" accepted the second interpretation and hence "images themselves, not merely worship of them, were forbidden".[15] But Sahas points out that "this injunction did not prohibit even Judaism from developing images, symbols and artefacts for its religious expression, as the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition indicate".[16] The book of Exodus which contains the prohibition also speaks of the making of the tabernacle with the "Cherubim skilfully worked" Ex. 36:8. Jaroslav Pelican thinks that "the cherubim were depicted in

human form".[17] We could add many more examples but what is important is that the Commandment does not prohibit the making of icons.

The attack on icons called forth some of the ablest theologians of the Orthodox Church to formulate elaborate theological defense of the icon. We shall consider very briefly the teachings of St. John Damascene, the last of the Byzantine Fathers, with a bit of the teachings of Theodore of Studios and the patriarch Nicephorus added.[18]

St. John Damascene delivered three orations "Concerning those who Reject Images" to overthrow the argument of iconoclasts. Discussing the veneration of icons Damascene quotes the words of St. Basil the Great "the honour given to the image passes over to the prototype".[19] Giving examples from the Old Testament St. Damascene asks whether the tabernacle, the cherubim and finally the temple in Jerusalem itself were not the works of human beings — "hand-made and fashioned by the skill of man ?"[20] St. Damascene is unequivocal in describing what is it that is represented in an icon. It is not "the invisible, incorporeal, uncircumscribed, formless God" who is depicted in the icon. because "to give form to the Deity is the height of folly and impiety".[21] However, the Incarnation has drastically changed everything. He says "Since God has appeared in flesh and dwelt among men, I make an icon of God in so far as he has become visible. I do not venerate matter but I venerate the Creator of matter, who for my sake has become material . . . and has through matter effected my salvation."[22] Elsewhere he writes

> But the contempt of the material because it is material is a Manichean error . . . Flesh is material — can you deny it ? My salvation was brought to me by material means, and I venerate the wood of the blessed Cross, not as though it were God, but as being full of the work and the grace of God. The hill, Calvary, the tomb, the stone, the very source of the Resurrection — all are material ; the ink and the pages of the Gospels, the table from which we take of our salvation and all its furniture. The very body and blood of the Lord — all the material. You must either forbid all respect to these things, or you must allow with it respect to the images consecrated to the name of Christ and to his friends, the saints, as being overshadowed by the grace of the Holy Spirit.[23]

In the above statements St. Damascene provides us with a sound theological basis for iconography. The basis of icons is the incarnation of Christ. The mystery of the incarnation is

that the false dichotomy between spirit and matter is done away with once and for all and that God is not averse to touching the material world. As St. Damascene says in the quotation above "the contempt of the material" is a Manichean heresy — this heresy was essentially dualistic with its roots in Gnosticism and believed, like Gnosticism, in an irreconcilable hostility between spirit and matter. Now, the iconoclastic controversy which was evidently rooted in the spirit/matter dichotomy had a further ramification that extended to the Person of Christ with its divine and human natures and the relation of each to the other. In fact Christology is the key to understand the iconoclastic controversy. Here again we cannot enter into a detailed examination of this vast, complex subject but only in so far as this subject bears on the question we are concerned with.

The perplexing question between the disputants was whether an image of Christ portrayed him both in his divine and human natures or whether only in his human nature. We have already considered St. John Damascene's answer to this question. But the problem became more complicated and intractable because some iconoclasts maintained that it was permissible to draw pictures of Christ "before his suffering, death and resurrection but that after the resurrection even his body had inherited immortality and could not be circumscribed in a portrait".[24] But other iconoclasts maintained that Christ could not be represented in images even before his resurrection, for the miracles, deeds and sufferings of Christ had been of the one divine-human person.[25] They asked, how can the flesh of Christ be separated from the Godhead ? Only fools "venture to separate the flesh from the Godhead, and represent it by itself as the image of a mere man".[26] Does the image contain the Godhead? If so, there is a mingling and confusion of divine and human natures (which is Monophysite) and a circumscription of God. If not, there is a false separation of the godhead and the human (which is Nestorian).[27] As Pelican aptly observes "the central issue in the christological argument over the icons, therefore, was the question whether it was possible or permissible to 'circumscribe' Jesus Christ — a question that was to occur long after the controversy."[28] The iconodules said that Christ could not be cirucmscribed "according to his divine nature" but could be circumscribed "according to his human nature"; otherwise his suffering would be an illusion and the whole incarnation a phantasy. But an icon did not involve circumscribing either the deity or the manhood of Christ. As Pelican sums up the issue "What was going on in the making of icons was *not circumscription*, since Christ was not bodily present, *but*

depiction. The issue of circumscription was in fact a false issue. It did not apply to the icons of the Theotokos and the saints who had only a human nature ; yet the iconoclasts objected to these as well."[29]

So the real issue for the iconodules was the reality of the incarnation of Christ "which the icons sought to portray".[30] The Second Nicean Council says unambiguously "This heresy is the worst of all heresies. Woe to the iconoclasts ! It is the worst of all heresies as *it subverts the incarnation of our Saviour*".[31] The historian Trench says "Had the iconoclasts triumphed, when their work showed itself in its true colour, it would have proved to be the triumph, not of faith in an invisible God, but *of frivolous unbelief in an incarnate saviour*".[32] The above two statements tie in perfectly well with what an Orthodox theologian says regarding Protestant Christianity : "Because Protestantism has not kept this image alive and active by the use of icons and the imitation of its various stages in the sacraments, and *has thereby retained only the Word cut off from the practical activity of the image*, it comes as no surprise that some Protestant theologians have even espoused the idea of replacing the fundamental image itself, because they consider the incarnation of the Son of God to be a *pure myth*."[33] This is an indictment that our churches need to take seriously and brood over.

Theodore of Studios citing numerous incidents mentioned about Christ in the holy Gospels said that since the Gospel writers could "write of Christ in words", we could "write in gold" on the icons.[34] The Seventh Ecumenical Council said, "the pictorial image in iconography and the verbal narrative in the Gospels are in agreement with one another, and both alike emphasize that the incarnation of God the Word is genuine and not illusory".[35] The point is that icons and the Gospels have the "same content" and serve the same purpose and therefore both are to be held with equal reverence. Since the content of both was the same question that the Patriarch Nicephorus raised "Why do you worship the book and spit upon the picture?" becomes pertinent. If the icons are an unfit portrayal of Jesus Christ, the Gospels too would share the same fate. The Patriarch bluntly demanded "either accept these icons or get rid of those Gospels."[36]

Further the same argument against icons can be stretched to include the cross, the Eucharist, "patterns of Christian worship", etc., since all these are material things just as the icons are but as St. John damascene said "they lead us through matter to the God who is beyond matter".[37] Incidentally, the iconoclasts made an exception with regard to the Holy Cross

and said, "We worship the symbol of the Cross on account of him who was fastened to it" and regarded the Eucharist as "the only true image" of Christ.[38] Here the iconoclasts expose themselves as being inconsistent and consequently their attack on the icons is devoid of any substance.

Having cleared the ground to some extent, it is now time to look briefly at the religious significance of the icons.

(a) The icons have educative and evangelistic value. Uspenskii calls icons "Theology in Images" because they can set forth the great truths of our faith just as effectively as the Holy Scriptures can. If a non-Christian were to ask "show me your faith so that I too may believe" then the icons can be a very good point of departure "leading him from the data of sense experience to things invisible" and finally to "open himself to the Christian message".[39] Also, contemplation of icons can lead one to a sublime experience of the devine in and through the material. This sublime experience can stir one to the very depths of one's being. St. Gregory of Nyssa could never pass a painting showing the sacrifice of Isaac and an extract from the acts of Second Nicean Council says "If the holy Gregory, vigilant in divine cogitation, was moved to tears at the sight of the story of Abraham, how much more shall a painting of the incarnation of our Lord Christ, who for us was made man, move the beholders to their profit and to tears ?"[40] Far from leading to superstition and blind belief as some mistakenly tend to think the contemplation of icons can lead to the banishment of every superstition as the Council of Trent (16th century) rightly observed and remarked furhter that the "mysteries of our redemption, depicted by paintings and other representations" can instruct the faithful, strengthen their memory and help them to reflect always on "the articles of faith".[41] It is interesting to know that at least one sectarian writer that the present writer knows of, supports the above argument we have set forth. Writing way back in 1939 Edward Ziegler of the Church of the Brethren, in his book titled *The Book of Worship for Village Churches* written for the rural Churches of India says

> We all know how village people love pictures. It is a ture instinct within them which causes them to love graphic representation of the truths they seek to learn. *In the worship of God, too, pictures have an important place.* Certainly one of the best ways to make a place of worship attractive and worshipful is to have within it a few good worshipful pictures. There is a prejudice in some sections of India against the use of pictures, lest our non-Christian friends should think we worship the pictures and are idolaters. This objection is of doubtful validity, and of

> scarcely enough weight to justify our depriving the village churches of the inspiration which good religious pictures bring.
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> *In worship they have a real place in attracting the thoughts toward God, or making real and graphic some lesson we try to teach.* The world is full of great pictures which can be used in worship . . . The highest genius of the painters and sculptors of Europe was spent on pictures and statues of Christ and the Madonna and the Apostles and martyrs and saints of the Church. Let us use this rich heritage. And today, there is a growing treasure of Indian Christian pictures . . . These pictures may be used in worship to build those moods which are the home atmosphere of the spirit.[42]

The reason for quoting this passage at some length is that it sums up admirably what we have been saying on this point.

(b) We have already mentioned several times that the icons stand for the reality of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. We need not labour this point any further.

(c) Closely related to what was said above is the fact that "the icon is a demonstration of the Christian belief in the personal character of God".[43] He is not an impersonal, undifferentiated unity totally removed from the world of matter and change reposing within himself (or itself) and unconcerned about anything outside of his being. In the Old Testament we find God as one who relates himself to mankind as its redeemer and reveals his purpose for the world in the history of his chosen poeple. In the New Testament this purpose is further clarified in the sending of His Son for the redemption of the whole world. The icon is a witness to the profound biblical insight into the nature of God as ultimately personal.

(d) Sahas writes, "The icon is an affirmation of the dignity of the human nature".[44] The Logos assumed a human nature, even though it was a fallen nature, to redeem and recreate it. Sahas draws a distinction between "Image" and "Likeness" so characteristic of Orthodox thought and says that though the image was marred by sin, man was yet capable of attaining the likeness of God for which he was created. This attainment has now become possible because of the Logos who took our nature upon himself and renewed it. Sahas asserts "the icon is a pointer to the recreated, or actually transfigured, human nature by the means of its association with the divine in the person of Christ."[45]

(e) The icon is a testimony to "the value of the material

creation".[46] St. John Damascene said "Do not insult matter ; for it is not without honour ; nothing is without honour that God hath made".[47] A contempt of the material world is no part of the Christian faith (as we saw earlier) since the incarnation is meant to redeem not only mankind but the entire creation as St. Paul tells us (Rom. 8 : 19-21). Unlik Gnosticism, the Christian faith is not redemption from matter, because as St. Damascene says "I shall not cease to venerate matter, for it was through matter that my salvation came to pass".[48]

(f) Finally, an icon is able to mediate sanctification and also stand as an eschatological sign for the final "transfiguration" of the entire cosmos. The Seventh Ecumenical Council said "When we honour and venerate an icon, *we receive sanctification.*"[49] Leonid Uspenskii has an interesting comment to offer on the subject of transfiguration. He writes "Sacred art is a visible expression of the dogma of the transfiguration" and then observes that this transfiguration through man communicates itself to the entire cosmos and therefore "all the visible world represented in the icon changes, becomes the image of the future unity of the whole creation — the Kingdom of the Holy Spirit".[50] Seen thus, an icon is an instrument that communicates sanctity to the worshipper and an emblem that points him to the coming of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1). This is perhaps the reason why icons play such an important role in the worship of the Orthodox Churches and are considered to be an "integral part of the liturgy".[51]

To sum up, an icon stands for the reality of the Icarnation of Christ, the dignity and worth of the human person, the value of the material world and the final transformation of the entire cosmos according to the purpose of God revealed in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

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