

Medieval Sourcebook: John of Damascus: In Defense of Icons, c. 730

The Iconoclastic controversy lasted from 726, when Emperor Leo III (717-741) began an attack on the use of religious images, until 843 when The Empress Theodora allowed their restoration. The two periods of Iconoclasm were separated by the reign of the iconodule Empress Irene, under whom the Second Council of Nicea 787 was held. Although politics, and especially the politics of church and state were involved, there were serious theological issues at stake. A number of defenses of Icons were made: based on the existence of Divinely approved images in nature and Scripture; based on the reality of the incarnation; and based on a Platonic metaphysics of ascending images which participated in the prototype. The first two defenses are here presented in the first reading; the Platonic defense in second. Both were written by the Icons' most distinguished proponent, St. John of Damascus (c.675-c.749), John was able to write freely since lived under Muslim rule outside the boundaries of the Byzantine emperor. In this century plus discussion of art, we find one of the most searching investigations into the nature of art in "western" culture before the Italian Renaissance.

from *On Holy Images* (c. 730)

Now, as we are talking of images and worship, let us analyse the exact meaning of each. An image is a likeness of the original with a certain difference, for it is not an exact reproduction of the original. Thus, the Son is the living, substantial, unchangeable Image of the invisible God, bearing in Himself the whole Father, being in all things equal to Him, differing only in being begotten by the Father, who is the Begetter; the Son is begotten. The Father does not proceed from the Son, but the Son from the Father. It is through the Son, though not after Him, that He is what He is, the Father who generates. In God, too, there are representations and images of His future acts, -that is to say, His counsel from all eternity, which is ever unchangeable. That which is divine is immutable; there is no change in Him, nor shadow of change. Blessed Denis, [note: the Pseudo-Dionysius] who has made divine things in God's presence his study, says that these representations and images are marked out beforehand. In His counsels, God has noted and settled all that He would do, the unchanging future events before they came to pass. In the same way, a man who wished to build a house would first make and think out a plan. Again, visible things are images of invisible and intangible things, on which they throw a faint light. Holy Scripture clothes in figure God and the angels, and the same holy man (Blessed Denis) explains why. When sensible things sufficiently

render what is beyond sense, and give a form to what is intangible, a medium would be reckoned imperfect according to our standard, if it did not fully represent material vision, or if it required effort of mind. If, therefore, Holy Scripture, providing for our need, ever putting before us what is intangible, clothes it in flesh, does it not make an image of what is thus invested with our nature, and brought to the level of our desires, yet invisible? A certain conception through the senses thus takes place in the brain, which was not there before, and is transmitted to the judicial faculty, and added to the mental store. Gregory, who is so eloquent about God, says that the mind, which is set upon getting beyond corporeal things, is incapable of doing it. For the invisible things of God since the creation of the world are made visible through images. We see images in creation which remind us faintly of God, as when, for instance, we speak of the holy and adorable Trinity, imaged by the sun, or light, or burning rays, or by a running fountain, or a full river, or by the mind, speech, or the spirit within us, or by a rose tree, or a sprouting flower, or a sweet fragrance.

Again, an image is expressive of something in the future, mystically shadowing forth what is to happen. For instance, the ark represents the image of Our Lady, Mother of God, so does the staff and the earthen jar. The serpent brings before us Him who vanquished on the Cross the bite of the original serpent; the sea, -water, and the cloud the grace of baptism.

Again, things which have taken place are expressed by images for the remembrance 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. It is of two kinds, the written image in books, as when God had the law inscribed on tablets, and when He enjoined that the lives of holy men should be recorded and sensible memorials be preserved in remembrance; as, for instance, the earthen jar and the staff in the ark. So now we preserve in writing the images and the good deeds of the past. Either, therefore, take away images altogether and be out of harmony with God, who made these regulations, or receive them with the language and in the manner which befits them. In speaking of the manner let us go into the question of worship.

Worship is the symbol of veneration and of honour. Let us understand that there are different degrees of worship. First of all the worship of *latreia*, which we show to God, who alone by nature is worthy of worship. When, for the sake of God who is worshipful by nature, we honour His saints and servants, as Josue and Daniel worshipped an angel, and David His holy places, when he says, "Let us go to the place where His feet have stood." Again, in His tabernacles, as when all the people of Israel adored in the tent, and standing round the temple in Jerusalem, fixing their gaze upon it from all sides, and worshipping from that day to this, or in the rulers established by Him, as Jacob rendered homage to Esau, his elder brother, and to Pharaoh, the divinely established ruler. Joseph was worshipped by his brothers. I am aware that worship was based on honour, as in the case of Abraham and the sons of Emmor. Either, then, do away with worship, or receive it altogether according to its proper measure.

Answer me this question. Is there only one God? You answer, "Yes, there is only one Law-giver." Why, then, does He command contrary things? The cherubim are not outside of creation; why, then, does He allow cherubim carved by the hand of man to overshadow the mercy-seat? Is it not evident that as it is impossible to make an image of God, who is uncircumscribed and impassible, or of one like to God, creation should not be worshipped as God. He allows the image of the cherubim who are circumscribed, and prostrate in adoration before the divine throne, to be made, and thus prostrate to overshadow the mercy-seat. It was fitting that the image of the heavenly choirs should overshadow the divine mysteries. Would you say that the ark and staff and mercy-seat were not made? Are they not produced by the hand of man? Are they not due to what you call contemptible matter? What was the tabernacle itself? Was it not an image? Was it not a type and a figure? Hence the holy Apostle's words concerning the observances of the law, "Who serve unto the example and shadow, of heavenly things." As it was answered to Moses, when he was to finish the tabernacle: "See" (He says), "that thou make all things according to the pattern which was shown thee on the Mount." But the law, as not an image. It shrouded the image. In the words of the same Apostle, the law, contains the shadow of the goods to come, not the image of those things. For if the law should forbid images, and yet be itself a forerunner of images, what should we say? If the tabernacle 'was a figure, and the type of a type, why does the law not prohibit image-making? But this is not in the least the case. There is a time for everything.

Of old, God the incorporeal and uncircumscribed was never depicted. Now, however, when God is seen clothed in flesh, and conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honouring that matter which works my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God. How could God be born out of lifeless things? And if God's body is God by union, it is immutable. The nature of God remains the same as before, the flesh created in time is quickened by, a logical and reasoning soul.

I honour all matter besides, and venerate it. Through it, filled, as it were, me. Was not the with a divine power and grace, my salvation has come to thrice happy and thrice blessed wood of the Cross matter? Was not the sacred and holy mountain of Calvary matter? What of the life-giving rock, the Holy Sepulchre, the source of our resurrection: was it not matter? Is not the most holy book of the Gospels matter? Is not the blessed table matter which gives us the Bread of Life? Are not the gold and silver matter, out of which crosses and altar-plate and chalices are made? And before all these things, is not the body and blood of our Lord matter? Either do away with the veneration and worship due to all these things, or submit to the tradition of the Church in the worship of images, honouring God and His friends, and following in this the grace of the Holy Spirit.

from St. John Damascene *On Holy Images*, trans. by Mary H. Allies (London, Thomas Baker, 1898), pp. 10-17.

from *The Fount of Wisdom*

But since some find fault with us for worshipping and honouring the image of our Saviour and that of our Lady, and those, too, of the rest of the saints and servants of Christ, let them remember that in the beginning God created man after His own image. On what grounds, then, do we shew reference to each other unless because we are made after God's image? For as Basil (the Great, c. 330-379), that much-versed expounder of divine things, says, the honour given to the image passes over to the prototype. Now a prototype is that which is imaged, from that which the derivative is obtained. WhN, was it that the Mosaic people honoured on all bands the tabernacle which bore an image and type of heavenly things, or rather of the whole creation? God indeed said to Moses, "Look that thou make them after their pattern which was shewed thee in the mount." The Cherubim, too, which overshadow the mercy seat, are they not the work of men's hands? What, further, is the celebrated temple at Jerusalem? Is it not handmade and fashioned by the skill of men?

Moreover the divine Scripture blames those -who worship graven images, but also those who sacrifice to demons. The Greeks sacrificed and the Jews also sacrificed: but the Greeks to demons and the Jews to God. And the sacrifice of the Greeks was rejected and condemned, but the sacrifice of the just was very acceptable to God. For Noah sacrificed, and "God smelled a sweet savour", receiving the fragrance of the right choice and goodwill towards Him. And so the craven images of the Greeks, since then, were images of deities, were rejected and forbidden.

But besides this who can make an imitation of the invisible, incorporeal, uncircumscribed, formless God? Therefore to give form to the Deity is the height of folly and impiety. And hence it is that in the Old Testament the use of images was not uncommon. But after God in His bowels of pity became in truth man for our salvation, not as He was seen by Abraham in the semblance of a man, nor as He was seen by the prophets, but in being truly man, and after He lived upon the earth and dwelt among men, worked miracles, suffered, was crucified, rose again and was taken back to Heaven, since all these things actually took place and were seen by men, they were written for the remembrance and instruction of us who were not alive at that time in order that though we saw not, we may still, hearing and believing, obtain the blessing of the Lord. But seeing that not every one has a knowledge of letters nor time for reading, the Fathers gave their sanction to depicting these events on images as being acts of great heroism, in order that they should form a concise memorial of them. Often, doubtless, when we have not the Lord's passion in mind and see the image of Christ's crucifixion, His saving passion is brought back to remembrance, and we fall down and worship not the material but that which is imaged: just as we do not worship the material of which the Gospels are made, nor the material of the Cross, but that which these typify. For wherein does the cross, that typifies the Lord, differ from a cross that does not do so? it is just the same also in the case of the Mother of the Lord. For the honour which we give to her is referred to Him Who was made of her incarnate. And

similarly also the brave acts of holy men stir us up to be brave and to emulate and imitate their valor and to glorify God. For as we said, the honour that is given to the best of fellow-servants is a proof of good-will towards our common Lady, and the honour rendered to the image passes over to the prototype. But this is an unwritten tradition, just as is also the worshipping towards the East and the worship of the Cross, and very many other similar things.

A certain tale, too, is told, how that when Augarus [ie. Abgar V (4BCE-50CE), King of Edessa and a reputed correspondent of Christ] was king over the city of the Edessenes, he sent a portrait painter to paint a likeness of the Lord, and when the painter could not paint because of the brightness that shone from His countenance, the Lord Himself put a garment over His own divine and life-giving face and impressed on it an image of Himself and sent this to Augarus, to satisfy thus his desire.

Moreover that the Apostles handed down much that was unwritten, Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, tells us in these words: "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and bold the traditions which ye have been taught of us, whether by word or by epistle." And to the Corinthians he writes, "Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the traditions as I have delivered them to you."

trans S.D.F. Salmon in John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series*, (repr. Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), Vol IX, p. 88

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