I have examined the final copy of this Thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in History

____________________________________
Anthony Gythiel, Committee Chair

We have read this Thesis
And recommend its acceptance:

____________________________________
Stuart Lasine, Committee Member

____________________________________
Ariel Loftus, Committee Member
DEDICATION

To Christiane, Caleb and Hannah,
my most precious icons
Christ is the icon of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation
Colossians 1:15

Pictures are sometimes capable of overwhelming man more than words. They can have a magical effect on him; they can transform him without his noticing it. . . . Pictures have a healing influence which comes from the healing power of the Original Picture to which the true picture belongs.
Max Picard
*Man and Language*

God’s image recalls us to Itself.
Wendell Berry
*Duality in Entries*
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Wichita State Graduate School for the financial support they have contributed to the completion of this thesis, including paid travel expenses to present parts of it as a conference paper as well as the Dora Wallace Hodgson Summer Research Award. I would also like to thank the Wichita State University History Department for granting me the John Lowell Rydjord Award.

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Speaking of heroes, I must also acknowledge my employer Warren Farha, owner of Eighth Day Books. This thesis would have been absolutely impossible without his flexibility and understanding. In fact, my interest in the iconoclastic controversy would have never been piqued without his influence. Furthermore, the combined effect of my studies at WSU and my employment at his store, which has been an education in and of itself, has been a truly amazing educational experience. Thank you for everything, brother.

I am also deeply indebted to my parents, Mike and Patty Doom. Though unknowingly, they too played a huge role in facilitating the completion of this thesis. Their lives have exemplified the values of hard work and perseverance for as long as I can remember. Indeed, the ability to pull as many “all-nighters” as I have over the last month is the direct result of their influence. Their decision to let me stay up into the wee hours of the night as a little boy to watch Johnny Carson must have surely influenced my ability to go without sleep! More importantly, however, by watching their examples I have learned to be determined, tenacious, and faithful no matter how difficult circumstances may become, even if it means working 24 – 32 hours straight as it did on more than one occasion for this thesis. Thank you Mom and Dad for instilling in me the values that have given me the will and capacity to complete an undertaking such as this.

Finally, and most importantly, words could never sufficiently express my gratitude and debt to my beautiful wife Christiane and my two wonderful children, Caleb and Hannah. Their patience with such a busy and preoccupied husband and father over the last several years has been absolutely amazing. The love, support, and strength of my wife, however, has been especially impressive. She has always been an exemplary model of selfless love to me, from the days of our dating seven years ago until the present. Over
the last year, however, she has almost single-handedly kept a small business afloat, maintained a home, and raised two children, all the while dealing so graciously with an insane husband. As far as I am concerned, she is a prime candidate for sainthood. Indeed, she is truly the most beautiful icon of Christ I know. Thank you for all of your incomprehensible love and support, my dear. I love you.
ABSTRACT

The roots of the Byzantine debate over icons can be traced back to the Christian Church’s very inception. Indeed, an underlying current of iconoclasm manifested itself repeatedly over the centuries but did not erupt into a large-scale controversy until the eighth century. The timing of this outbreak, however, is significant for it followed four hundred years of intense debate over the person and nature of Christ. Consequently, by the end of the seventh century icons began to be associated with the incarnation of Christ and by the end of the eighth century the icon had become intimately connected to the Christological controversies. Hence, in addition to providing a general knowledge of the chronology and key characters of the controversy, this thesis will explore the theological development of the first phase of the debate, particularly as it related to the Christological controversies.

A summary of the major historiographical theories promulgated to explain the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy will be followed by an overview of the development of Christian art. Then, after a brief chronological summary of the debate, the focus will shift to three pivotal individuals: Patriarch Germanus, Monk John Damascene, and Empress Irene. By exploring their contributions, both to the Christological dimensions of the debate and to the restoration of icons in the Byzantine Empire, the contours of the controversy over icons will come into focus. Finally, a brief comparison between the Emperor Charlemagne and the Monk Theodore Abu Qurrah will demonstrate the divergence of views taken toward the icon by the East and West following the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 CE).
PREFACE

My interest in the world of Byzantium was first awakened seven years ago. Shortly after beginning my employment at Eighth Day Books, I picked up and read a copy of St. John Damascene’s famous apology for icons. In addition to the clarity and effectiveness of his rhetoric, I was amazed at the striking similarities between his description of an eighth-century Byzantine church service and my own recent encounter with the services of a local Orthodox Church. Several years later, I read an eighth-century commentary on a Byzantine church service by Patriarch Germanus and was impressed once again by the continuity of both the form and content of Orthodox Church services over the last twelve centuries.

The Damascene’s emphasis upon the material world and its vital role in the Christian doctrine of salvation, combined with Germanus’ articulation of the profound symbolic significance of the material structure and content of the Byzantine Church service, however, impacted me the most. Although I had accepted the incarnation of Christ for as long as I could remember, I had never before considered the depth of its implications. The idea of connecting the incarnation to anything but the salvation of man had never crossed my mind.

According to both John and Germanus, however, the impact of the incarnation extended beyond the mere salvation of man. By embracing the material world and taking on flesh, Christ not only enabled the fallen condition of man to be healed, but he also facilitated the restoration and sanctification of the entire physical cosmos, including basic elements such as water (e.g. for baptism), bread and wine (e.g. for the Eucharist), and even wood (e.g. for crosses and icons). Thus, just as the iconostasis of an Orthodox church connects the sanctuary and the nave, so too icons serve as connecting points
between the material and the spiritual, between heaven and earth. Indeed, St. Stephen the Younger (ca. 713 – 765 CE) once called the icon a “door to the heavenly realm.”

Furthermore, John and Germanus concluded that icons were important defenders of the incarnation. To depict the physical appearance of Christ implies the reality of the full humanity of Christ. The 20th century icon painter and monk, Father Zinon says it best: “Icons aren’t decorations, but a reflection that God became man. They are holy doors.” Indeed, for these Byzantine saints, icons were so intimately connected to the incarnation that they were considered essential to the Christian faith.

The consequences of this thinking have been profound. In addition to provoking violent debate over the role of icons in the eighth and ninth centuries, they have also affected me personally. In fact, the topic of this thesis is the direct result of such ideas. Additionally, after much debate and deliberation, my family recently embraced them by joining the Orthodox Church. Thus, personal sympathies for the Orthodox Christian faith, where icons play such an important role in its worship, must be acknowledged from the outset.

While some, however, might assume that such a background should immediately disqualify me from any historical inquiry into the iconoclastic controversy, to automatically rule such a testimony out as too emotional, biased, and unobjective is simply a preconceived and unfair judgment. Although admittedly susceptible to a loss of objectivity, as all historians are, C.S. Lewis once argued that the one who looks at an object of study from the outside as a supposed objective and emotionally detached observer is in the end just as likely to be misleading by overlooking angles that are only visible to the inside perspective of one looking along the object of study, angles that might actually reveal the “real and transcendental nature” of the object. Thus, according
to Lewis, my inside perspective may in fact prove to be more beneficial than harmful. Indeed, I hope Pliny the Younger (ca. 61 CE – ca. 112 CE) was correct when he concluded that no book is so bad that there is absolutely nothing good in it. Hopefully something good can be found in this thesis.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART I – OVERVIEW</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. METHODOLOGY &amp; CONTRIBUTION: AN INDISPUTABLE STARTING POINT</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Art as Religious Ally</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Methodology</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Contribution</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.1 Need for Comprehensive Narrative</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2 Need to Re-emphasize Role of Theology</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2.1 Seventh Ecumenical Council</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.3 Need to Include Western Perspective</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.3.1 Emperor Charlemagne &amp; the Libri Carolini</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.4 Need to Revive Neglected Pivotal Individuals</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.4.1 Patriarch Germanus</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.4.2 Empress Irene</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.4.3 Arab Monk Theodore Abu Qurrah</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART II – HISTORIOGRAPHY &amp; HISTORY</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. VOLCANOES AND HERESIES: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Crisis of Over-Explanation</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Lop-Sided Sources</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Culmination of Catastrophes</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1 Military Defeats &amp; Threats</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2 Volcanic Eruption</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Religious Reform</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Clash of Cultures: Greek Christians vs. Oriental Syrians &amp; Armenians</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Conflict of Religions: Byzantine Christianity vs. Judaism &amp; Islam</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 Christian Heresies: Monophysites, Monothelites &amp; Manichaeans</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 Monks vs. Emperors</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.9 Byzantine Position of the Holy</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.10 Synthesis Around the Holy</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.11 Monocausal Explanation or Panoramic Picture?</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.11.1 Doctrine Painted into Picture</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. CATACOMBS &amp; ICONS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

xiii
THE DEBATE BEGINS

5.1 Theological Foundation of the Icon

5.2 Patriarch Germanus

5.3 Emperor Philippicus Revives Monothelitism

5.4 Emperor Leo III

5.5 Correspondence of Patriarch Germanus:
   Iconoclasm Outside Constantinople

5.6 Resignation of Germanus

6. MONK JOHN DAMASCENE & EMPEROR CONSTANTINE V:
   COMPETING THEOLOGIES EMERGE

6.1 Monk John Damascene

6.2 Emperor Constantine V: A Foreboding Baptism

xv
6.2.2.1 Imperial Meetings Explore Icons ...................................................... 120
  6.2.2.1.1 “The Advice of the Old Man Concerning Holy Icons ” .................. 121
6.2.2.2 “Enquiries” of Emperor Constantine V
  Introduce Christology ........................................................................ 121
  6.2.2.2.1 Nature of Images ....................................................................... 122
  6.2.2.2.2 True Image is Eucharist .......................................................... 123
6.2.2.3 Council of Hieriea (754 CE) ........................................................... 124
  6.2.2.3.1 Ecumenical? ........................................................................... 124

7. EMPIRE IRENE & THE SEVENTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL:
  TEMPORARY RESTORATION OF ICONS ........................................... 126

  7.1 Imperial & Patriarchal Regime Change: Iconoclast to Iconophile .......... 126
    7.1.1 Leo IV Assumes Throne ................................................................ 127
    7.1.1.1 Leo IV’s Iconoclast Colors Surface .......................................... 128
    7.1.2 Widowed Empress Irene Assumes Throne ..................................... 128
    7.1.3 Patriarch Paul IV Paves Way for Icon Restoration ....................... 130
    7.1.3.1 Paul Falls III & Flees Patriarchal Post for Monasticism ......... 130
    7.1.3.2 Paul Calls for Ecumenical Council ........................................... 131
    7.1.4 Empress Irene Organizes Pivotal Patriarchal Election ................. 132
    7.1.4.1 Iconophile Tarasius Elected with Conditional Acceptance ....... 133
      7.1.4.1.1 Tarasius Requests Ecumenical Council ................................ 134
  7.2 Diplomatic Preparations for Ecumenical Council ................................ 134
    7.2.1 Letters of Invitation to Eastern Patriarchates ................................ 135
    7.2.2 Letters of Invitation to Pope Hadrian I ........................................ 135
  7.3 The Seventh Ecumenical Council ....................................................... 136
    7.3.1 First Attempt Dispersed by Imperial Army .................................. 137
    7.3.2 Second Attempt Convenes .......................................................... 137
      7.3.2.1 Brilliant & Symbolic Change of Venue .................................... 138
    7.3.3 Council Begins ........................................................................... 138
      7.3.3.1 Overview of Council’s Eight Sessions ..................................... 139
  7.4 Sixth Session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council ................................ 141
    7.4.1 Council of Hieriea: Ecumenical? .................................................. 142
    7.4.2 Antiquity and Authenticity of Icons .............................................. 143
    7.4.3 Patristic Hermeneutics ................................................................ 145
      7.4.3.1 Epiphanius: Forged Source .................................................... 146
      7.4.3.2 Theodotus: Fabricated Source ................................................ 147
      7.4.3.3 Amphilochius: Fragmented Source ......................................... 148
      7.4.3.4 Gregory of Nyssa: Manipulated Source ................................. 150
    7.4.4 Icons or Idols? ............................................................................ 151
      7.4.4.1 Deceptive Colors or Narrative Gospel? .................................... 152
      7.4.4.2 Material Worship or Means to God? ....................................... 153
  7.4.5 Iconoclast Innovation ..................................................................... 154
  7.4.6 Christological Implications of the Icon .......................................... 155
    7.4.6.1 Icons Accused of Reviving Nestorianism & Monophysitism .... 156
      7.4.6.1.1 Iconophiles Respond ......................................................... 157
7.4.7 Persecution to Restoration ................................................................. 159

PART IV – CONTROVERSY CONTINUES

8. EMPEROR CHARLEMAGNE & MONK THEODORE ABU QURRAH:
   THE DIVERGENCE OF EAST AND WEST ........................................... 162

   8.1 Attitudes Toward Art Foreshadow Great Schism ............................ 162
   8.2 Iconoclasm Reverberates Faintly in West .................................... 163
      8.2.1 Decrees of Seventh Ecumenical Council Create Controversy .... 163
   8.3 Charlemagne Emerging as “New David” ....................................... 164
   8.4 Synod of Frankfurt (794 CE) ....................................................... 165
      8.4.1 The Middle Way: Rejection of Iconoclasm and Iconophilism ... 165
      8.4.2 Pope Gregory the Great’s View of Icons: Didactic Pictures ... 166
      8.4.3 Franks Adopt and Expand Gregory’s Views ......................... 167
      8.4.4 Icon Veneration Viewed as Idolatrous Worship of Wood ...... 167
   8.5 Monk Theodore Abu Qurrah ....................................................... 168
      8.5.1 A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons ................. 168
         8.5.1.1 Summary of Arguments .............................................. 169
         8.5.1.2 Prostration to Icon of Saint Passes to Saint in Person .... 170
         8.5.1.3 Prostration to Icon of Saint Rouses Saint to Pray .......... 171
         8.5.1.4 Joy or Disdain Given to Icon of Christ Repaid ............ 172

CONCLUSION ............................................................................................. 174

BIBLIOGRAPHY ......................................................................................... 179

APPENDICES ............................................................................................. 190

   A. Recent Literature on Art and Religion ........................................ 191
   B. Florilegium Germani: Literary Flowers by Patriarch Germanus .... 192
   C. Florilegium Patri: Literary Flowers by the Church Fathers ........... 193
   D. Definition of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 CE) ............. 196
   E. On the Martyrdom of St. Euphemia .............................................. 200
# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mansi</td>
<td>J.D. Mansi, <em>Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG</td>
<td>J.P. Migne, <em>Patrologiae Cursus Completus Series Graeca</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART I – OVERVIEW

CHAPTER 1

METHODOLOGY & CONTRIBUTION:
AN INDISPUTABLE STARTING POINT

It is my opinion that at the start of any book a writer ought to make his
starting-point indisputable, and his methodology straightforward and
authoritative.

Diogenes of Apollonia

1.1 Art as Religious Ally

“Ever since the dawn of history, when man first became a religious animal and
almost simultaneously – give or take a millennium or two – made his first clumsy
ttempts at adorning the walls of his cave, he has had to face one fundamental question:
is art the ally of religion, or its most insidious enemy?" This question, posed by historian
John Julius Norwich in his trilogy on the Byzantine Empire, has become especially
pertinent for the twenty-first century. The recent explosion of literature, conferences, and
even academic programs promoting the integration of arts and religion provide ample
proof of this.2

However, this is not the first time the question of art’s relationship to religion has
come to the fore.3 Indeed, by turning back to that distant and glorious world of

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2 Imago Dei, Calvin College’s Festival of Faith, Baylor University, along with their bi-
annual conference Art and Soul, and the journal Image, along with its annual Glen
Workshop, are just a few examples. See appendix A for a list of recent literature on the
topic.

3 Although the focus of this thesis is on the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy, the
relationship between art and religion became a ground of battle again in the sixteenth
century during the Protestant Reformation in Northern Europe and yet again in the late
eighteenth century during the French Revolution; see D. Freedberg, “The Structure of
Byzantium, and more specifically to the iconoclastic controversy that gripped it during the eighth and ninth centuries, one can find an adamant affirmation of art as a true ally of religion. However, before exploring the contours of this controversy, a few words must be said about the methodology and contributions of this thesis.

1.2 Methodology

C.S. Lewis, in his essay “Meditation in a Toolshed,” recounts an experience of being inside a dark toolshed with a beam of sunlight shining in through a crack at the top of the doorway. Lewis describes his experience in two distinct ways: looking at the beam and looking along the beam. On the one hand, looking at the beam he saw both the light and specks of dust floating within the beam while everything else in the toolshed was dark and out of focus. On the other hand, when he stepped inside the beam and looked along the light, this subtle shift in perspective completely transformed his view. Lewis no longer saw the beam of light as an outside observer but instead immersed himself in the world of the light. Consequently, his eyes were opened to a sight he would have otherwise failed to see: the universe outside of the toolshed with green leaves dancing on a tree nearby and the sun radiating its light off in the distance.

Acknowledging the uniqueness of these two perspectives — looking along and looking at — and the very distinct experiences they each produce, raises questions like,

---


4 Icon = image; Iconoclast = Breaker of images; Iconophile = Lover of images.
“Which is the better experience? Is one way of looking more true than the other?” Such questions are especially pertinent to any historical inquiry and Lewis’ illustration offers a model for a historical methodology.

While acknowledging the fact that there are times when one view is indeed superior to another, Lewis correctly concludes his essay by noting that it is essential to, “on pain of idiocy, deny from the very outset the idea that looking at is, by its own nature intrinsically truer or better than looking along.” Instead, it is more helpful to approach both angles, looking intently both along and at all available sources.

Thus, a balanced examination of the iconoclastic controversy will be attempted by simultaneously escorting the reader inside the beam to look along the controversy, as well as leading the reader outside the beam to look at the controversy. However, while providing an outside view at the controversy by continuously contextualizing the content within its historical, political, social, and theological backgrounds, the emphasis of the study will admittedly be upon an inside view along the dispute through an exploration of the theological arguments involved in the controversy.

Historical theologian Christoph Schönborn, in a discussion of his evolving views of historiography, notes the odd tendency of modern historians to seek to pinpoint the “unavowed motives supposed to be hidden behind those that are expressed” (e.g. the economic, political, or military motives behind the “pious pretext” of religion in the iconoclastic controversy). He goes on to argue that such a methodology arrogantly purports to grasp history better than the actual firsthand participants, claiming “a superior

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5 Lewis, “Meditation,” 215.

viewpoint from which it can judge the course of history by revealing the ‘true’ motives which are supposed to have remained as it were ‘repressed’ in the unavowable unconscious of the people of that period.” Instead of taking such a “psychoanalytical” posture, Schönborn concludes that there is a

need for a different approach to history, less suspicious, less critical even. To put it very simply, what our sources say must be taken seriously; witnesses must be believed. First and foremost we must start from the hypothesis that they are telling the truth or at least that they regard what they are saying to be the truth. ⁸

Romilly Jenkins expresses similar sentiments in his study of Byzantium, suggesting that “on the whole it is best to go back to things as they were and as our sources depict them; and to trace what the men of those times thought significant, rather than what we, in our enlightened days, imagine they must have meant by their expressions of belief.” ⁹ Thus, this thesis will be primarily driven by primary sources and the focus will be upon the pivotal individuals of the period in question, especially their roles and writings in the debate. ¹⁰

While such an approach may be criticized for overemphasizing the role of the leaders in the controversy (the “Great Man” theory), and thereby neglecting the attitudes and roles of the common people, this study hopes instead to raise the status of several

⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.
⁹ Romilly Jenkins, Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries AD 610 – 1071, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 18, (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 76.

¹⁰ The concept of pivotal individuals is adopted from Wichita State University History professor Dr. Craig Miner’s use of “pivotal moments” as the guiding principle for his history of Kansas in Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854 – 2000 (Lawrence: The University of Kansas, 2002), xiii; This approach has also been used by historian Mark Noll in his history of Christianity, Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997).
participants in the debate who have heretofore not received the attention they deserve. Indeed, by focusing on several figures who have typically been overshadowed by the dominant person of the controversy (i.e. John of Damascus), the hope is to paint a more complete picture that includes the full cast of characters.

1.3 Contribution

Averil Cameron contends that one must “be brave to return to the subject of Byzantine Iconoclasm, a subject which, we may feel, has been done to death.” However, despite the fact that the sheer quantity of studies on the iconoclastic controversy would seem to indicate that the depths of the subject had been thoroughly plumbed, there nevertheless continues to be ample opportunity for further research. Indeed, this study hopes to make several contributions to the field of study.

1.3.1 Need for Comprehensive Narrative

The need for a comprehensive narrative of the iconoclastic controversy is undeniable. While short summaries of the controversy can be found in practically any book written on the Byzantine Empire, and despite the endless output of specialized scholarly articles on the subject, no thorough narrative has been written since Edward James Martin’s early twentieth century publication, A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy – long out of print and very difficult to obtain these days. Hence, this study is the beginning of an effort to fill this glaring gap. Indeed, one of its primary goals is to

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give the reader a general knowledge of the chronology, key characters, and theological contours of the first phase of the controversy.¹³

1.3.2 Need to Re-emphasize Role of Theology

By exploring the theology of the iconoclastic controversy, this study hopes to help reinforce the central role theology played in the debate over icons. As Byzantine scholar Georges Florovsky notes, for years scholars argued that doctrine had nothing to do with the conflict, that “theological arguments or charges were invented, as it were, post factum, as efficient weapons in the struggle. Some historians went so far as to suggest that the religious problem was simply a kind of ‘smoke screen,’ manufactured and employed by the rival parties as a disguise to conceal the true issue.”¹⁴ While the theological dimensions of the controversy have certainly been emphasized at times, including the most recent and striking example by Christoph Schönborn, *God’s Human Face*, the emphasis upon theology as a key component in the explanation of the controversy has on the whole not received the attention it deserves.¹⁵ One way to facilitate this is to explore the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

1.3.2.1 Seventh Ecumenical Council

Initiated by the Empress Irene, the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 CE) made a point-by-point refutation of the iconoclastic Council of Hiereia (754 C.E). Hence, this

¹³ Due to the limited scope of this thesis, the focus will be strictly upon the first phase of the controversy.


¹⁵ Christoph Schönborn, *God’s Human Face: The Christ-Icon*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994); this work is particularly helpful for understanding the relationship between the Trinitarian and Christological controversies of the fourth thru seventh centuries and the eighth-century iconoclastic controversy.
council provides one of the few glimpses into the arsenal of arguments being deployed by both the iconophiles and the iconoclasts at the peak of the controversy. Indeed, the Seventh Ecumenical Council is certainly one of the most important primary sources of the period.

Unfortunately, however, limited attention has been given to this council. While Leo Donald Davis provides an introductory examination of the council in his study, The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325 – 787): Their History and Theology, Ambrosios Giakalis makes a much more thorough examination of the council’s theology in his book, Images of the Divine: The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council.\(^{16}\) Additionally, the text of the sixth session of this council, which contains the point-by-point refutation of the Council of Hierieia, has been translated into English along with a commentary by Daniel J. Sahas in his work, Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth Century Iconoclasm.\(^ {17}\) Other than these three works, however, no extensive exploration of the council has been undertaken.

Consequently, in an effort to contribute to a limited number of studies and to spark renewed interest in this council, the contours of the Seventh Ecumenical Council will be examined in the seventh chapter (Empress Irene & the Seventh Ecumenical Council: Temporary Restoration of Icons). In addition to articulating what would eventually become the Byzantine Church’s official theological stance toward icons, this council also provoked dissension between the Christian East and West.

---


1.3.3 Need to Include Western Perspective

The last thing most people think of when discussing the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy is the Christian West and the Frankish Empire. However, the definition and decrees of the Seventh Ecumenical Council created great controversy between the Byzantines and the Emperor Charlemagne and his court, as demonstrated by the Libri Carolini (The Carolingian Books).

1.3.3.1 Emperor Charlemagne & the Libri Carolini

Initiated by the Frankish Emperor Charlemagne and written in response to the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the Libri Carolini provide an important view into the diverging relationship between the Greek East and the Latin West. Although there have been a number of important articles on this work, the subject nevertheless tends to be ignored or merely mentioned in passing in most accounts of the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy. Consequently, the final chapter (Frankish Emperor Charlemagne & Arab Monk Theodore Abu Qurrah: The Divergence of East and West) will draw attention to this neglected work in an effort to contrast the developing divergence of views toward icons in the East and the West. In addition to the emphasis upon the theology of the controversy and a brief exploration of the Western perspective, this study will also focus on the characters who played pivotal roles in the controversy.

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1.3.4 Need to Revive Neglected Pivotal Individuals

While most studies of the first phase of the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy give ample attention to St. John Damascene (ca. 675 – 749 CE), particularly the three treatises he penned in defense of icons, oftentimes very limited attention is given to the Patriarch Germanus, to the Empresses Irene, or to the Monk Theodore Abu Qurrah.

1.3.4.1 Patriarch Germanus

Germanus (ca. 630/650 – ca. 730/742 CE), the patriarch of Constantinople, penned a whole series of letters, many of which were written during the rising tide of iconoclastic sentiment in the Byzantine Empire.19 Indeed, several of these letters articulate some of the key arguments that will be taken up and employed against the iconoclasts during the first period of the controversy.20 Surprisingly, however, none of them have ever been completely translated into English and studies on the iconoclastic controversy typically give scant attention to the Patriarch.

In fact, no full-length study has ever been undertaken on the Patriarch Germanus in English.21 Consequently, a *florilegium* of passages most relevant to the iconoclastic

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19 These letters have never been translated into English and deserve a full-length study of their own. The Greek text is found in J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus Series Graeca*, 161 vols. in 166 (Paris, 1857 – 1887), vol. 98 (PG 98) and J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Florence / Venice, 1759 – 98, reprinted 1901 – 1927), vol. 13, (Mansi, 13)


controversy from these letters will be included in appendix B. These passages will then provide the material necessary to focus the spotlight upon Patriarch Germanus as the key character for the fifth chapter (Patriarch Germanus & Emperor Leo III: The Debate Begins). Indeed, the hope is for Patriarch Germanus to receive the recognition he deserves as the first, and in many ways, foundational defender of icons for the first period of the controversy. Patriarch Germanus, however, is unfortunately not the only important figure of the iconoclastic controversy to have been relegated to the sidelines by many historians.

1.3.4.2 Empress Irene

The Empress Irene (ca. 752 – 803 CE) played a pivotal role in bringing an end to the iconoclastic policies of the Empire. Indeed, the Empress Irene overturned the iconoclastic theology and policies of the first period of iconoclasm by tenaciously and successfully organizing the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 C.E. Yet, despite the magnitude of her role in the controversy, she has regrettably received limited attention.

Although recent research is beginning to acknowledge her importance, as well as the importance of the Empress Theodora, who likewise helped facilitate the conclusion of the

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22 The word *florilegium* is a Latin word that is derived from the words *flos*, “a flower”, and *lego*, “I gather”; thus a gathering of flower-like quotes.

23 This is partly due to the limited supply of primary sources; there is really only one source for the life of Irene: Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284 – 813*, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). This *Chronicle* is one of the best examples of Byzantine historiography, providing a year by year account based on the annals of the Roman / Byzantine Empire, as well as those of the Muslim dominated Christian East. While there is a *Life of Irene*, written sometime after the final triumph of icons in 843 C.E., it relies solely upon Theophane’s *Chronicle*, thus adding nothing of significance. For a comparison of *The Life of Irene* and Theophane’s *Chronicle* see Warren T. Treadgold, “The Unpublished Saint’s Life of the Empress Irene (BHG 2205),” *Byzantinische Forschungen* 8 (1982): 236 – 251.
second phase of the controversy, the focus upon Irene as a pivotal personality in the seventh chapter of this study is put forth in an effort to contribute to this growing body of research (Empress Irene & the Seventh Ecumenical Council: Temporary Restoration of Icons).  

1.3.4.3 Arab Monk Theodore Abu Qurrah

Most people have never heard of the Arab monk Theodore Abu Qurrah (c. 755 – c. 830 CE), excluding Sidney H. Griffith, who wrote a Ph.D. Dissertation on him in 1978.  

Despite the many related articles published by Griffith following his dissertation, as well as an English translation of Theodore’s Arabic treatise on icons, Theodore Abu Qurrah still remains a very obscure and unknown figure. In addition to providing a rare window into the social and religious relationships between Jews, Muslims and Christians at the turn of the ninth century, his defense of icons also provides evidence for the successful transmission of the arsenal of theological arguments in the iconoclastic

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controversy in the East. Indeed, the arguments promulgated by the early defenders of icons (i.e. Patriarch Germanus, the Monk John Damascene, and the Empress Irene) proved to be formative for the East, even to this day. Hence, the final chapter (Frankish Emperor Charlemagne & Arab Monk Theodore Abu Qurrah: The Divergence of East and West) will summarize Theodore’s defense for the veneration of icons and contrast the different directions icons took in the East and the West.

Before turning to any of these pivotal individuals and their theological contributions to the debate, however, it might be helpful to begin by providing a glimpse into the myriad of explanations scholars have suggested for the cause of the controversy followed by an exploration of the evolution of the icon from its beginnings in the catacombs up to the outbreak of the controversy.
PART II – HISTORIOGRAPHY & HISTORY

CHAPTER 2

VOLCANOES AND HERESIES: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

We seem to have lost the key to this momentous crisis of history. The origin, the meaning, and the nature of the Iconoclastic conflict are rather uncertain and obscure. Modern historians do not agree on the main points of the interpretation.

Georges Florovsky
Christianity and Culture

2.1 Crisis of Over-Explanation

While the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy may prima facie appear to have been simply a debate over the Christian use of art, the debate is in fact much more multifaceted. In the same way that innumerable explanations have been offered by historians to explain the decline and fall of Rome, there have also been a wide range of theories promulgated to explain the rise of Byzantine imperial iconoclastic policy. The controversy has been debated so much that, according to Byzantine historian J.M Hussey, “assessments vary from considering it as the most significant event in Byzantine history to regarding it as of almost only peripheral importance.” Likewise, art historian Charles Barber notes that the controversy has been cast as a proto-reformation movement, a personal and idiosyncratic imperial policy, an aspect of a massive institutional reform in Byzantium, an atavistic reaction to the growth in the cult of icons, a foreign aberration in the history of orthodoxy, a debate over the place of the holy in society, a reaction to the collapse of the Late Antique order that shaped early Byzantium, an epistemic crisis, and a continuation of the Christological debates in Byzantine theology.2

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Over thirty years ago Peter Brown, the renowned historian of Late Antiquity, justifiably concluded that “the Iconoclast controversy is in the grip of a crisis of over-explanation.”

2.2 Lop-Sided Sources

The complexity of determining an ultimate cause to the iconoclastic controversy is compounded even further by the lop-sidedness of available primary sources. The final triumph of the iconophiles resulted in the destruction of iconoclastic writings, including materials such as imperial decrees, council acts, theological treatises, letters, etc. Consequently, the only available glimpse into the iconoclastic perspective comes secondhand from the iconophiles’ polemical writings quoting their iconoclastic opponents for the sole purpose of refuting them. This includes, for example, the decrees of the iconoclastic council of Hiereia (754 CE) preserved in the acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 CE), the decree of the iconoclastic council of 815 CE included in a treatise by the iconophile Patriarch Nikephorus, as well as other fragments of iconoclastic literature contained in various theological treatises. Hence, due to clear hostile biases against iconoclasm in the surviving iconophile sources, Byzantine historian


5 A.A. Vasiliev, History of the Byzantine Empire 324 – 1453, vol. 1, 2d ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 251; see also Hussey, 36: “the legendary embroidery in iconodule literature was already obscuring the motives and influences behind the controversy . . . Added to this, the comparative paucity of sources and the survival of iconoclast material only in an iconophile setting must inevitably increase the difficulties of fair appraisal.” Stephen Gero attempts to balance the picture by focusing upon more obscure Armenian, Georgian, Syriac, and Arabic sources in Byzantine Iconoclasm During the Reign of Leo III with Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources, Vol. 346, Subsidia Tomus 41 (Louvain: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1973), iv.
A.A. Vasiliev accurately concludes that “scholars have differed greatly in their estimate of the iconoclastic period.” Indeed, drawing attention to these diverse “estimates” before turning to the actual controversy will provide a more complete and contextualized picture.

2.3 Culmination of Catastrophes

Many Byzantine historians agree that the series of crises experienced by the Byzantines in the seventh century played a pivotal role in the outbreak of iconoclasm the following century. Charles Diehl and Paul Lemerle argue that it was “one of the most gloomy periods in Byzantine history. It was an era of serious crisis, a decisive moment when the very existence of the empire seemed to hang in the balance.” Peter Brown, however, puts it best in his estimation of the period as “an age of emergency, the Byzantine equivalent of the Battle of Britain.” Indeed, the Empire had faced a near perpetual onslaught of problems during the seventh century, including financial deficits, natural disasters such as volcanoes, earthquakes, famines, and plagues, as well as the threat of encroaching and menacing neighbors.

2.3.1 Military Defeats & Threats

One of the most pressing seventh century concerns for the Byzantine Empire was the growing presence and military power of a number of surrounding ethnic groups. The

\[\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{6}}\text{Ibid.}\]


\[\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{8}}\text{Peter Brown, The Rise of Western Christendom, 2d ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 391.}\]
Persians were an imminent threat in the early part of the seventh century, defeating Antioch in 612 CE, Jerusalem in 614 CE, and Alexandria around 618 CE. However, by 629 CE the Emperor Heraclius defeated the Persians and was received at Constantinople in triumph as he returned what was claimed to be a relic of the cross of Christ.

Meanwhile, the Avars and the Slavs were evolving into menacing threats. The Avar Empire attacked the walls of Constantinople in 626 CE but was forced to retreat. Similarly, the Slavs unsuccessfully besieged Thessalonica in 617 and 619 CE, but as they began to settle entire tribes around the same area in Macedonia they became an even more constant source of tension for the Byzantines.

More importantly, the formation of the Bulgar state in the latter half of the seventh century was an even greater cause of concern. After crossing the Danube and settling nearby, Emperor Constantine IV attempted a military campaign against the Bulgars but was defeated and forced to abandon territories south of the lower Danube and pay tribute to the Bulgars. As the Bulgars continued to advance into the regions occupied by the Slavs, the two groups intermingled and created an even more powerful Thracian threat that would continue to haunt the Byzantine Empire over the next several centuries.

The most pressing concern, however, came from the rapid rise of Islam and its military prowess. Indeed, the Muslims successfully captured Basra in 634 CE, Damascus in 635 CE, all of Syria by 636 CE, Jerusalem and Palestine around 637 CE, Alexandria and Egypt by 642 CE, and by 673 CE they were at the doorsteps of Constantinople. For five successive years they attacked the capital from both land and sea but, fortunately for Byzantium and the energetic Emperor Constantine IV, by 677 CE the

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Muslims were forced to flee and signed a peace treaty. Nevertheless, the Muslims still retained a significant portion of Byzantium, including Syria, Palestine, Egypt and North Africa (even Carthage by 698 CE), and thus remained a constant threat to the Empire.

The combined effect of the threats posed by these various groups, and particularly the military defeats suffered to them, naturally provoked a reaction by the ruling elite of the empire. Indeed, Byzantine and Patristic scholar Andrew Louth argues that confronted with such dismal conditions the Byzantines responded in several ways. In addition to replacing the administration and military system inherited by Rome with a more centralized bureaucracy in Constantinople, they reorganized the empire into “themes.”

Prior to the seventh century, based on Roman principles of administration, the civil and military powers had been maintained separately. However, with the empire spiraling out of control these two powers came into the hands of one theme military leader (the strategus). Progressively implemented in provinces as they came under attack, this tradition had already begun with Justinian and his praetors of certain regions and then continued with the creation of the two exarchies of Ravenna and Carthage as the West came under attack by the Lombards and Moors. Finally, by the seventh century under the Heraclian dynasty, it evolved and expanded into its own official form of themes,

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10 Partly due to the successful use of “Greek fire.” According to the entry “Greek Fire” in Alexander P. Kazhdan, ed. The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, vol. 2 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 873: “the most likely ingredients included crude oil . . . mixed with resin and sulphur, which was then heated and propelled by a pump (siphon) through a bronze tube (strepton). The liquid jet was ignited either as it left the tube or by flaming projectiles fired after it.”

11 The word “theme” comes from the Greek word thema which originally meant an army corps but eventually signified the district in which the unit operated with all power concentrated in the authority of one military general – the strategus; see Vasiliev, History of Byzantine Empire, I.226 – 229 for a discussion of the origin and development of the theme organization.
beginning with the creation of the Armenian and Anatolian themes to protect Asia Minor from Muslims, followed by the Opsikion theme to defend Constantinople, then a theme to protect the sea from Muslim fleets, another one in Thrace to counter the Bulgars, yet another in Greece to control the Slavs, and then finally one in Sicily to continue the struggle against the Muslims in the West. However, political and military reorganization were not the only reactions. Indeed, as Louth concludes, the outbreak of iconoclasm, “can be seen as the last of the religious reactions to the loss of the eastern provinces in the early seventh century.” Military threats and defeats, however, were not the only source of provocation. Indeed, they were more like the rumblings that typically precede a volcanic eruption.

2.3.2 Volcanic Eruption

As early as the ninth century the chronographer Theophanes the Confessor offered a geological explanation as the impetus for the imperial iconoclastic policy instituted by Emperor Leo III. According to Theophanes, in the summer of 726 CE, a vapour as from a fiery furnace boiled up for a few days from the depth of the sea between the islands of Thera and Therasia. As it gradually became thicker and filled with stones because of the heat of the burning fire, all the smoke took on a fiery appearance. Then, on account of the density of the earthy substance, pumice stones as big as hills were thrown up against all of Asia Minor, Lesbos, Abydos, and coastal Macedonia, so that the entire surface of that sea was filled with floating pumice. For Leo, this volcanic eruption could mean only one thing: the culmination of the wrath of God provoked by Byzantine idolatry.


In the mind of Leo, the prayers offered to icons by the Byzantine people seemed to be a clear violation of the Mosaic commandments against worshipping false gods and making graven images. The Emperor thus concluded that God’s anger must have been provoked by what he perceived to be widespread Byzantine idolatry of icon “worship” throughout the Empire. Indeed, the responsibility had clearly fallen upon him to cleanse his kingdom.

Consequently, assuming “that God’s wrath was in his favour instead of being directed against him,” Theophanes notes that Leo “stirred up a more ruthless war on the holy and venerable icons.” In fact, the immediate result of this volcano was the first public act of iconoclasm with the removal of the icon of Christ from the Chalke gateway of the imperial palace. However, the fact that Leo viewed the volcanic eruption as a sign from God requiring a response of repentance and cleansing indicates the presence of an authentic religious element in the eruption of the controversy over icons.

2.4 Religious Reform

Sincere religious conviction on the part of the iconoclastic emperors, particularly Leo III, has indeed been suggested by Byzantine scholars as an explanation for the initiation of iconoclastic policies. Art historian John Moorhead suggests that “issues of religious principle seem to have been central” to Byzantine iconoclasm, indicated first

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14 Theophanes, Chronicle, 559.
and foremost by Leo III’s policies and actions, which “can easily be interpreted as the
cconduct of a man with scruples as to the propriety of the cult paid” to icons.15

Following an attempt to appease the wrath of God by the forced baptism of Jews
and Montanists in 722 CE, Leo III issued the Ecloga in 726 CE, a Greek law code that, in
addition to reflecting the changes since the Code of Justinian the Great and making the
law far more accessible, emphasized Biblical morality.16 The preface to this legal manual
concludes with explicit instructions for fair wages to officers so that “what is said by the
prophet may not be fulfilled in us, ‘he sold justice for money’ (Amos 2:6), and that we
may not incur the wrath of God for being transgressors of his commandments.”17 Clearly,
Leo III believed that God punished evil-doers.18

Frustrated and perplexed by the unrelenting troubles of the Empire previously
outlined, the Byzantines had long been trying to find a cause for God’s wrath. Therefore,
according to this view, iconoclastic Byzantine emperors were merely following their
religious convictions: they believed God had called them to reform the Church and purify

15 John Moorhead, “Byzantine Iconoclasm as a Problem in Art History,” Parergon 4

16 Scholars continue to debate the actual date of publication of this manual, ranging from
726 to 741 CE; see Vasiliev, History of Byzantine Empire, I.241 for discussion and
sources of this debate and I.240 – 249 for a discussion of the various legislative changes
made under Leo III.


18 The fear of divine punishment for disobedience is rooted in both the Judaic and pagan
tradition: for the Judaic roots, see Leviticus 26; for the pagan roots, see Angelos
Chaniotis, “Under the Watchful Eyes of the Gods: Divine Justice in Hellenistic and
Roman Asia Minor” in The Greco-Roman East: Politics, Culture, Society, Yale Classical
1 – 43.
the faith from what they interpreted, in historian Paul Lemerle’s words, as “a superstition close to paganism.”

Lemerle goes on to argue that the “worship” of images had not been a part of early Christian worship and yet images eventually came to be accepted by the Church for their didactic and edificatory functions. However, the problem, according to Lemerle, was the extreme evolution of the use of these images: “images were no longer seen as symbols, but rather the sanctity and miraculous power of the persons depicted were also attributed to their representations, and these were offered personal worship.” Hence, the problem the iconoclasts’ fought against, concludes Lemerle, was not so much icons per se, but rather “the abuses that this idolatry entailed, and against other similar excesses.”

As a result, the rise to prominence of the icon was simply interpreted as a revival of paganism and iconoclasm was thus a religious reform movement meant to arrest its progress and restore the purity of the Christian faith.

Theologian Christoph Schönborn also attributes the iconoclastic controversy to authentic religious reform on the part of the emperors. Schönborn, claiming to accept at face value the motives articulated by the iconoclasts and thus determined to allow them to

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20 In addition to the following chapter, see also discussion of the heritage of iconoclastic thought dating back to early Christianity connected to Origenism in John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends & Doctrinal Themes*, rev. 2d ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), 43; and Romilly Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries AD 610 – 1071*, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 18, (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 76 ff.


22 Ibid.

23 Vasiliev, *History of Byzantine Empire*, I.253; see next chapter for discussion of the rise of the icon and the controversy and problems this provoked.
speak for themselves, concludes that “If we read the documents of the period, one fact
stands out: Emperor Leo III, the undoubted initiator of the iconoclast movement,
declared that he wished to carry out a religious reform. Leo wanted to purify the Church,
to rid it of idols, that is, of religious images and their veneration.”24 Schönborn goes on to
demonstrate his view by pointing out the symbolic way that Leo III chose to initiate his
iconoclastic policy.

In 726 CE, Leo III ordered the removal and destruction of the icon of Christ over
the Chalke gate of the imperial palace, an icon that served as a symbol of the protection
of Christ over both emperor and empire. In its place, Leo ordered the installation of a
cross to serve as a more proper (non-idolatrous) symbol of Christ and his triumph with
the following inscription:

The Lord not suffering Christ to be portrayed in voiceless form devoid of breath,
by means of earthly matter which the scriptures reject, Leo and his son, the new
Constantine, trace the thrice-blessed sign of the cross, the glory of believers, at the
palace gates. 25 According to Schönborn, “This double gesture shows us Leo III’s intentions: to free the
empire from the sin of idolatry and to place it once more under the victorious symbol of
Christ, the sign under which the great Constantine had triumphed: in hoc signo vinces (in
this sign you will conquer)!”26 While the desire to replace an icon with a cross
demonstrates the possibility of sincere religious conviction on the part of Leo III, the
confrontation of two distinct cultures may have played a role in the debate over icons as
well.


25 Cited in Moorhead, “Byzantine Iconoclasm,” 15; for a discussion of the role of and
relationship between the cross and icons see John Moorhead, “Iconoclasm, the Cross and

2.5 Clash of Cultures: Greek Christians vs. Oriental Syrians & Armenians

Scholars have suggested that a conflict between two distinct religious cultures may have also contributed to the outbreak of the iconoclastic controversy. Historian and theologian John Meyendorff observes that Greek-speaking Christians with a pagan past “had inherited a taste for religious imagery,” while, on the other hand, “Eastern Christians, particularly the Syrians and the Armenians, were much less inclined by their cultural past to the use of images.”\textsuperscript{27} Meyendorff concludes his argument by noting the significance of the Armenian or Isaurian origins of the iconoclastic emperors, thereby linking the iconoclastic policies of these emperors to their Eastern background. Vasiliev concurs with Meyendorff, noting that all of the iconoclastic emperors were of eastern descent – Leo III was Isaurian / Syrian, Leo V was Armenian, and Michael II and his son Theophilus were born in Phrygia of Asia Minor – and concludes that the birth-place of the iconoclastic rulers “cannot be viewed as accidental.”\textsuperscript{28}

But if these emperors’ oriental background helped shape their iconoclastic policies, what were the specific factors influencing them? George Ostrogorsky, in his masterful \textit{History of the Byzantine State}, points the way by suggesting that the iconoclastic controversy resulted from a lively interaction between a spiritually minded eastern Christianity with old surviving Christological heresies and with non-Christian religions such as Judaism and Islam.\textsuperscript{29}

2.6 Conflict of Religions: Byzantine Christianity vs. Judaism & Islam

\textsuperscript{27} Meyendorff, \textit{Byzantine Theology}, 42.

\textsuperscript{28} Vasiliev, \textit{History of Byzantine Empire}, I.254.

\textsuperscript{29} Ostrogorsky, \textit{History of Byzantine State}, 161.
During the seventh-century military onslaughts of the Muslims, the Near East was slowly being transformed into an Islamic world. Consequently, following the defeat of Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, the Byzantine Empire found itself in a constant struggle with the Islamic world, both militarily and ideologically.\(^\text{30}\) Despite strong ties between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, including many common scriptures and especially God’s command to make no idols or graven images (Ex. 20:4 – 6), there were still many disagreements.

Indeed, each group claimed to be the true defenders of the revelation of God. However, tensions had already been developing as the Jews and Muslims perceived Christianity as polytheistic with its doctrine of the Trinity. This source of tension was further compounded by the sharp conflict that emerged between the Muslims and Christians over imagery and icons, elements that had taken on an important role in Byzantine worship and piety well before the seventh century. Thus, according to this view, the eighth-century eastern-born emperors were not only responding to the charge of idolatry, but they were also seeking, according to Meyendorff, “to purify Christianity to enable it better to withstand the challenge of Islam.”\(^\text{31}\) In addition to such attempts to compete with Islam for the most pure faith, however, iconoclasm may have also been a spiritual response to the lingering echoes of earlier Christian heresies.

### 2.7 Christian Heresies: Monophysites, Monothelites & Manichaeans

Many scholars have also linked the rise of iconoclasm to a debate over the proper understanding of the person and nature of Christ. Meyendorff suggests that the debate “was intimately connected with the Christological issue which had divided Eastern

\(^{30}\) Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 42.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 43.
Christianity in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries.” This would include, for example, the Monophysites who argued that Christ had a single nature, the Monothelites who argued that Christ had a single will, and the Manichaeans who were disdainful of the material world and thus believed that Christ was purely spiritual. If the key to the work of Christ (i.e. the salvation of the world) was simply his divinity, as the Monophysites, Monothelites, and Manichaeans emphasized, then his humanity essentially played no role in the redemption of man. Consequently, there would be no reason to honor or remember his humanity through visual portrayals and it would be impossible to depict the spiritual dimension of Christ. Thus, as Paul J. Alexander points out in his work on Patriarch Nicephorus, “christological systems emphasizing the divine nature of Christ at the expense of His human nature were apt to lead to the rejection of religious images.” Naturally then, the Monophysites, Monothelites and Manichaeans tended to reject the icon, due to its material nature and emphasis upon the humanity of Christ (both nature and will).

Moreover, by the eighth century the non-Greek speaking East was mostly Monophysite. Consequently, the iconoclastic emperors of Syrian / Armenian descent would have grown up in a Monophysite atmosphere and would have been familiar, if not sympathetic, to its points. Thus, according to this view, the iconoclastic policies

32 Ibid., 42.
33 The Manichaeans were sometimes known by other names in the Middle Ages such as Paulicians, Bogomils, et al.
35 Ibid., 42.
implemented by Eastern Emperors such as Leo III were not surprising. Besides arguments over the relationship of icons to Christ, rising tensions between monks and emperors may have also contributed to the rise of iconoclasm.

2.8 Monks vs. Emperors

The dynamic growth of monks and monasteries in the Byzantine Empire naturally led to growing monastic wealth and power, so much so that the monks essentially became a state within a state. Conscious and nervous of their growing power, the iconoclastic emperors attempted to force them to “disperse and secularize their property,” ultimately leading to a conflict between the Church, under the leadership of the monks, and the Byzantine State, under the leadership of the emperor.

Some monks, however, were determined to assert their authority and despite phases of iconoclastic persecution, they refused to grant the emperor the right to make doctrinal decisions. Indeed, writing safely outside of the Byzantine Empire, and thus one of the most outspoken monks, the Monk John Damascene argued:

It is not for emperors to legislate for the Church. For look what the divine apostle says: ‘And God has appointed in the Church first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints,’ – he did not say emperors – and again ‘Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account.

Nevertheless, ultimately nothing much changed, for the monks eventually received their privileges back and the emperors retained their powers. However, while the tense relationship between monks and emperors may have indeed influenced iconoclastic

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37 Ibid.

policies, the holiness that the monks embodied and represented to the people may have been even more important of a factor in the controversy.

2.9 Byzantine Position of the Holy

Peter Brown, the renowned historian of late antiquity, systematically and single-handedly shifts the focus away from most of the standard explanations for the rise of iconoclasm in his article, “A Dark Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy.” He notes that a “careful study of Byzantine-Arab relations in the eighth century; a re-examination of the Muslim attitude to images in the same century; re-assessment of the position of the Jews in the Byzantine empire – these converging studies have led to the greatest caution in invoking the influence of any non-Christian culture in the genesis of the Iconoclast movement.” According to Brown, the iconoclastic controversy was instead essentially a dilemma over the position of the holy in the Byzantine world.

The question of what was holy and what was not, according to Brown, was the key question of the age. Whether iconclast, iconophile, or even Carolingian, the same questions were being posed: “where is the holy? what belongs to it and what does not?”

The answer for the iconoclasts and the Franks was clear and simple: those material objects that had been blessed by ordained priests. Brown notes that for the iconoclasts this answer could only include three possibilities: “the Eucharist, which was both given by Christ and consecrated by the clergy; the church building, which was consecrated by

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40 Ibid., 5.

41 Ibid., 8.
the bishop; the sign of the Cross” which, in addition to being a sacramental gesture in the rite of exorcism, was, more importantly, a sign for eighth-century Byzantines “given directly by God to men, when it first appeared in the sky to the Emperor Constantine.”42 Any other object was simply outside the realm of the holy.

Consequently, despite the fact that in the minds and hearts of the Byzantines the icon had managed to make a mighty leap across an abyss separating the holy and the profane, the iconoclasts argued that it could not possibly be holy because it had not been consecrated from above. To be used didactically or inspirationally was perfectly acceptable, but to be holy objects with supernatural powers was simply untenable. The iconophile, on the other hand, believed the icon could indeed be holy, serving didactically, inspirationally and supernaturally. As Brown puts it, for the iconophile the “icon was a hole in the dyke separating the visible world from the divine, and through this hole there oozed precious driblets from the great sea of God’s mercy.”43

Nevertheless, the iconophiles still accepted the same criterion of consecration promoted by the iconoclasts. However, the iconophiles did not simply suggest that an icon could be transformed by a blessing such as that performed over the Eucharist or a basilica.44 Instead, the icon could be considered holy either because of its divine origin (i.e. the icon “not made with human hands”) or because of its direct relationship to the holy person depicted (i.e. the Mandylion of Edessa with the face of Christ impressed

42 Ibid., 5.

43 Ibid., 7.

44 The exclusion of such a consecration, according to Brown, “omitted the one element which any self-respecting magician of the time knew to be obligatory” and therefore “the term ‘magical’, so lavishly applied by modern scholars to the use of icons, lacks any real meaning, when dealing with the habits of men who lived in an age that knew what real, professional magic was like” (7).
upon a handkerchief). According to Brown, “What the icons so palpably lacked in consecration from above, they made up for by consecration from the past.”

Brown concludes his argument on the role of the holy by noting that iconoclasts interpreted the growing use and abuse of icons as mere superstition. In their view, the dramatic rise of icons and devotion to them over the previous three centuries was “simply a haemorrhage of the holy” from those three great consecratable symbols (Eucharist, Basilica, and Cross) “into a hundred little paintings.” However, Brown continues his article by balancing out the argument.

2.10 Synthesis Around the Holy

Although Brown argues that the role of the holy was the pivotal point in the controversy over icons, he nevertheless proceeds to synthesize several other historiographical theories into his argument. Factoring into the debate, according to Brown, were many underlying issues, including: demoralization of the Byzantine world following seventh century Arab raids; Byzantine determination to remove and punish “the root sin of the human race, the deep stain of the error of idolatry;” the ability of the iconoclasts to “verbalize their anxiety” by presenting “their case with such irrefutable clarity;” “[s]avage disillusionment and contempt for failed gods;” the ending of the ancient world in Asia Minor and with it the weakening of the icon due to seventh century Arab invasions; and finally, the replacement of these weakened icons by the sign of the cross “with its unbroken association with victory over four centuries . . . a more ancient and compact symbol than any Christ-icon could be.” Thus, according to Brown, the


46 Ibid.

debate over icons was a response to a whole series of factors, both internal and external, with the role of the holy as the core component of the controversy.

2.11 Monocausal Explanation or Panoramic Picture?

Art historian Hans Belting, in his magisterial history of the image, argues that iconoclasm, “certainly the most-discussed chapter in the history of the icon, has produced a modern literature with controversial evaluations of the events that do not allow for any monocausal explanation.”

Schönborn wholeheartedly concurs in his historiographical opinion, noting that history “is always a complex fabric, the weave of which is not ‘explained’ when a single thread is picked out.” Consequently, just as one should not single out a single cause for the decline and fall of Rome, neither should one oversimplify the iconoclastic controversy by singling out one ultimate explanation.

Instead, one must take into consideration a multitude of factors, all simultaneously contributing to the historical phenomenon. Thus, while factors as diverse as military defeats, volcanoes, religious reform, cultural clashes, conflicts of religion, heresies, and the role of the holy have been articulated by scholars as explanations for the true and ultimate cause of the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy, a synthetic panoramic picture provides a better clue to the origins of this debate over the question of whether or not icons are a friend or foe of Christianity.

2.11.1 Doctrine Painted into Picture

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49 Schönborn “Theological Presuppositions,” 87.
The problem, however, is that the doctrinal dimensions of the controversy have not typically been included in such a picture. Often times the theology of the icon is simply dismissed as a mere pretext for the dispute. Belting, for example, suggests that the controversial issue of images was often times a surface issue for deeper conflicts existing between church and state, center and provinces, central and marginal groups in Eastern society. The court and the army struggled against the monks along a constantly shifting front. Heretical movements joined the fray...Economic factors also influence both the outbreak and the course of the conflict. Finally, the military, which always supports the winning party, was involved in the events from the start.50

Even more common is the tendency to underemphasize the importance of doctrine in the debate. As historical theologian Jaroslav Pelikan notes, the political and art-historical aspects of the controversy “have dominated the secondary literature, at the expense of the doctrinal or even the religious aspects.”51 Furthermore, at times the role of theology is even left out of the equation altogether. Historian Henri Gregoire has gone so far as to suggest that theological controversies “count for nothing” in the debate, that the iconoclastic controversy was “concerned with anything but philosophical speculation.”52

The reality, however, as Martin correctly concluded nearly a century ago in his narrative history of the controversy, is that iconoclasm “was ultimately a movement in the realm of thought, and must therefore have a philosophy and a theology.”53 Hence,

50 Belting, Likeness and Presence, 146.


53 Martin, History of Iconoclastic Controversy, 110.
while there were admittedly many contributing factors to the outbreak of the controversy, as outlined above, there were in fact particular ideas and theological arguments undergirding the two sides of the debate. Therefore, to view the theological contours of the controversy as a mere surface issue, or to dismiss them as completely irrelevant is simply an oversight of the obvious.

Instead, as Pelikan suggests in his study of Eastern Christendom, the “iconoclastic controversy was the eruption into open conflict of deep-seated differences that went back to the earliest stages of patristic theology, perhaps back to the Jewish origins of Christianity.” Indeed, in order to understand the eighth- and ninth-century debate over icons it is necessary to trace both the heritage and the controversy over art from the birth of Christianity through the catacombs and up to the rising popularity of icons in the sixth and seventh centuries.

54 Pelikan, 93.
CHAPTER 3

CATACOMBS & ICONS: THE EVOLUTION OF A CHRISTIAN ART

With the conversion of Constantine and the subsequent Christianization of the Empire, Christian art came out of the catacombs.

Philip Sherrard
The Sacred in Life and Art

3.1 Christianity & Art: Continual Conflict

The relationship between art and Christianity has persistently been plagued by controversy. Consequently, the evolution of an explicitly Christian art was an extremely slow and complicated process. While this is not the place for a thorough examination of that process, a basic understanding of the development of Christian art, and specifically the rise to prominence of the icon, is essential to comprehend the later contours of the Byzantine controversy.

The opposition to icons in the eighth and ninth centuries did not explode out of a vacuum. Instead, the pressure of seven centuries of unresolved conflict over the official stance of Christianity toward art could no longer be contained and burst forth into an empire wide controversy that bordered on civil war. Indeed, art historian Ernst Kitzinger argued in his seminal article on the pre-iconoclastic period that, “Instead of assuming a simple alternation of anti-iconic and pro-iconic periods, it is necessary to think more in terms of a continuing conflict, which finally erupted in an explosion of well-nigh world-historical import.” But what precisely were the origins and contours of this “continuing conflict”?

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1 Kitzinger, “Cult of Images in the Age Before Iconoclasm,” Dumbarton Oaks Papers 8 (1954): 85; this article has been immensely influential and was very helpful in my own development of ideas.
The simple and concise answer to such a question is the observation of four distinct divisions of development: 1) a first and second-century potential suspicion toward art; 2) a third-century symbolic and biblical art; 3) a fourth-century emergence of the icon; and 4) a sixth-century rise of devotion to the icon. A brief discussion of each of these stages of development will lead directly up to the outbreak of iconoclasm in the eighth century.

3.2 First- & Second-Century Potential Suspicions

The roots of the Byzantine debate over icons run very deep. While the earliest evidence for the Christian Church’s acceptance of art can be dated to the beginning of the third century, half a millennium before the outbreak of the iconoclastic controversy, the lack of material and literary evidence for Christian art during the preceding two centuries naturally raises the question of early Christian attitudes toward art for this period. Scholars have long debated this issue, most often arguing that early Christians were simply opposed to art during the initial two centuries.²

One exception to the absence of second-century literary evidence can be found in the Christian treatise Against Heresies. Composed by Irenaeus of Lyons as a handbook

defending orthodox Christianity against the prevalent second-century threat of Gnostic heresies, one passage attacks the Gnostic Carpocratics. This passage seems to confirm early antagonism toward Christian portrayals of Christ as Irenaeus compares their practices to the pagans:

They have images, some painted, some made of other materials, and they say their picture of Christ was made by Pilate when Jesus was among men. They put crowns on these and place them with images of Greek philosophers like Pythagoras and Plato. The rest of their veneration of images is like that of the pagans.³

Thus, Kitzinger’s suggestion that an “undercurrent of at least potential iconoclasm” was present in the Christian Church from its very inception seems to be a fair conclusion.⁴ To assert more, however, is difficult to actually prove. Nevertheless, such an “undercurrent” flowed out of two primary sources: Judaism and paganism.

3.2.1 Influence of Judaism

Despite its break from Judaism, Christianity has always remained heavily indebted to its Jewish roots.⁵ Indeed, when the earliest Christians spoke of the Scriptures they were not referring to the New Testament known by Christians today, but rather to the Jewish Bible (i.e. the Old Testament).⁶ Consequently, the primary source for a Christian moral code was – and still is – found in the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament.


⁴ Kitzinger, “Cult of Images,” 85.


In forming their views toward art, Christians thus inevitably turned to the first two Mosaic commandments prohibiting idolatry and the making of graven images. The problem, however, was the conflicting interpretations of these two commandments, particularly in their relationship to visual art. Because most of the earliest Christians were converts from Judaism and thus bound to the Mosaic Law, scholars have traditionally argued that Christians would have followed a rigorist interpretation of these commandments.\(^7\) For these Christians, so the argument goes, visual imagery was clearly linked to idolatry and thus impermissible. However, such an understanding of the Mosaic Law was not the only available interpretation, even within Judaism itself.

How were Jews to reconcile the command to make no graven image with God’s later command for Moses to fashion cherubim of gold for the ark of the covenant? Or, how could Solomon decorate the Temple with images of plants, animals, humans and even angels if God prohibited the depiction of any images?\(^8\) Furthermore, how could a Jewish synagogue at Dura-Europos be decorated with narrative scenes of the Old Testament if the second commandment strictly forbade all religious art?\(^9\) Indeed, the

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\(^7\) See Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God*, 7 – 10 for an overview of this argument and its proponents, including Adolf von Harnack’s student Hugo Koch whose work has influenced so many prominent scholars such as Walter Elliger, Edwin Bevan, Hans von Campenhausen, Norman Baynes, and Ernst Kitzinger.

\(^8\) Monk John Damascene noted these discrepancies in the eighth century CE; see his *Three Treatises*, I.16, 30 – 31 and I.20, 33 – 34.

fashioning of gold cherubim in the 13th century BCE under the leadership of the prophet Moses, the decorating of Temple walls in the 10th century BCE under King Solomon, and the portrayal of Biblical scenes in the Jewish synagogue of Dura-Europos in the 3rd century CE provide clear evidence that the Old Testament commandments against images were not interpreted by Jews as a blanket prohibition. Consequently, if the notion of a purely aniconic Judaism can be called into question, then the assumption that the Christians of the first two centuries were likewise completely opposed to art must at the very least be reexamined. Nevertheless, the pervasive presence of pagan practices in the early Roman Empire did in fact make it difficult for many Christians to initially accept a more liberal interpretation of the second commandment.

3.2.2 Reaction to Paganism

Devoted to the Mosaic Law and determined to be wholly set apart from the pagan Roman world in which they lived, the Christian communities of the first three centuries refused to participate in any practices that appeared to fly in the face of their commitment to worship their one invisible God. Thus, early Christians perceived practices like the worship of cult images housed in pagan temples or honoring and making sacrifices to the image of the Roman emperor as outright idolatry. Indeed, such actions were typically associated with the demonic world of paganism and early Christians refused to be led into such seemingly erroneous ways. In fact, their stubborn refusal to submit to any

10 Bigham, Early Christian Attitudes, 6.

11 See Chadwick, Early Church, 23 – 31 for a discussion on the Christian “Encounter with the Roman Empire.”

12 Ibid., 277; see also Ouspensky, Theology of the Icon, I.35 – 50.
common Roman traditions that seemed to contradict their faith was so strong that some were even willing to die before compromising.\(^{13}\)

Such Christians, however, may have initially failed to fully understand the pagan position toward statues and images.\(^{14}\) While the average Roman commonly interpreted cult statues as actual gods or dwelling places for the gods, intellectual pagans rejected such a simple view. The Platonic tradition had always understood material images as representations of the eternal forms. As a result, intellectuals such as Celsus, Porphyry, and even Julian, developed the Neo-Platonic tradition by articulating a system in which the visible images were merely a means to the higher world of invisible realities, thereby creating access to the prototype.\(^{15}\) Thus understood, the object of worship was not the image or statue itself, but rather the deity it symbolized.

Such a view, however, created a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the Neo-Platonists despised matter while still defending the material cult of images. Christians, on the other hand, regardless of whether they were completely aniconic or not, though embracing the physical incarnation of Christ, initially rejected any portrayals of Christ as God. Indeed, art historians Paul Finney and Robin Margaret Jensen have both explored


the early Christian reluctance to portray the invisible and divine God. Furthermore, iconographer Leonid Ouspensky argues that this initial tendency to reject the portrayal of the divine during the first two centuries CE

may be explained by a certain confusion in the attitude toward the image – a confusion which was undoubtedly due to the lack of an adequate artistic and verbal language. . . . the situation in the domain of art was the same as in theology or in the liturgy. Such lack of clarity and unity is due to the creature’s difficulty in accepting, assimilating, and expressing that which transcends it. . . . In order gradually to accustom the people to the inconceivable reality of the Incarnation, the Church first spoke to them in a language that was more readily accessible than a direct image. Therein, it seems, lies one of the main reasons for the abundance of symbols in the first Christian centuries. What was used, as St. Paul says, was liquid nourishment fit for childhood. The iconic quality of the image penetrated slowly and with difficulty into the awareness of the people, and into their art."}

Indeed, not until the fourth century, with the Christianization of the empire and a growing understanding of the implications of the incarnation that resulted from the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE and the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE, did the Christians begin to adjust their views. Nevertheless, the third century provides important clues to early Christian attitudes toward art.

3.3 Catacombs & the Third-Century Symbolic and Biblical Art

By the beginning of the third century, despite any possible suspicions or “potential iconoclasm” during the previous two centuries, literary and material evidence provides definitive evidence for a specifically Christian art. Indeed, the third century can be characterized by an art of Christian symbols and Biblical scenes. This art can be found on sarcophagi relief carvings, in Roman funerary settings such as catacomb wall paintings, and even in at least one Christian house church. Some of the earliest

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16 See Paul Finney, Invisible God, and Robin Margaret Jensen, Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); I am heavily indebted to Jensen’s scholarship on early Christian art.

17 Ouspensky, Theology of the Icon, 1.40-41.
catacombs were constructed during the reign of Commodus (180 – 192) when the Church acquired land outside the walls of Rome on the *Via Appia Antica*. This cemetery, placed under the supervision of a former slave named Callistus and the burial place of many third-century bishops, came to be called the Catacomb of Saint Callistus and is especially important for its earliest examples of figurative wall paintings. Additionally, the baptistery of a third-century house-church at Dura-Europos provides even further evidence for a widespread acceptance of Christian art. Hence, as Church Historian Henry Chadwick notes, by the third century “Christians were freely expressing their faith in artistic terms.”

Though still not immune from controversy, however, this freedom was facilitated primarily by a more nuanced understanding of idolatry.

### 3.3.1 Idolatry vs. Images

Toward the end of the second century, the early Church began to make an important distinction that would consistently play a vital role in the controversy over the Christian use of images: a distinction between idolatry and images. The most obvious illustration can be found in the writings of Tertullian (ca. 160 – 220 CE), where, for example, in one text he opposed Christians who produced idols or sold incense as a trade, and yet in another passage he comfortably referred to chalices with depictions of

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the Good Shepherd carrying his sheep.  

Hippolytus (ca. 170 – ca. 236 CE) likewise opposed those Christian artists working for pagans who were producing the very images martyrs were refusing to honor: “For anyone who is a sculptor or painter, let him know he must not make idols, and if he does not change his ways, he shall be expelled.”

Similarly, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 140/150 – ca. 220), while warning against the dangers of art being deceptive and potentially idolatrous, simultaneously endorsed the use of certain symbols by Christians as seals on their rings for correspondence purposes:

> The images which are engraved on it and which we use as a seal should preferably be a dove, a fish, or a ship with unfurled and rapid sails; one can even represent a lyre as did Polycrates or an anchor as did Seleucus; finally, one could represent a fisherman at the seashore, the sight of which would remind us of the apostle and the children drawn out from the waters [i.e. the newly baptized].

Thus, by distinguishing between idolatry and imagery, the Christian Church of the third century definitely endorsed the use of certain symbols and images. The most common forms, however, were still not specifically Christian images.

### 3.3.2 Baptism of Pagan Symbols

The artistic repertoire of early Christian artists increased immensely as the Church began to attach new symbolical significance to pagan symbols and traditional decorative motifs. Just as Church leaders like Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria had utilized and adapted Greek philosophy to articulate their theology, early Christian artists likewise began to employ elements of pagan art to portray their beliefs. In fact, most of the art of

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this early period was not an explicitly Christian art. Instead, its form was strikingly similar to the secular art of the time, as demonstrated by a comparison between wall paintings in the catacombs with those in the houses of Pompeii. The primary difference was simply the content conveyed. Indeed, a whole catalog of secular symbols and decorative motifs drawn from the storehouse of classical tradition became charged with new Christian meanings.

3.3.2.1 Roman Catacomb Examples

Many examples of such baptized symbols utilized by Christians have survived in the Roman catacombs. The most commonly known example is the symbol of a fish. Although the fish can clearly be linked to scriptural stories such as Jesus calling disciples to be fishers of men or feeding the crowds with miraculously multiplied fish and bread, Peter and the fish with a coin in its mouth, and the post-resurrection miraculous catch of fish, it was not originally a specifically Christian symbol. Instead, it had long been linked in Roman art to the gods Apollo, Aphrodite, Poseidon, and particularly to the cult of Dionysus with its promise of a blessed after-life. However, the Christians took this neutral symbol long used by the pagans, adopted it, and converted it into a symbol for Christianity. Indeed, the fish became a condensed form of the creed by transforming the Greek word for fish into an acrostic: *ichthys* = *Iesous Christos Theou Huios Soter* – Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. In addition to other examples of transformed symbols such as the peacock which came to symbolize immortality, the dove which eventually

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24 This may also help explain the reluctance of first- and second-century Christians to artistically represent their faith.

signified peace, and the garden or palm tree which represented paradise, Alain Besançon notes in his intellectual history of iconoclasm, that the ship, a symbol of prosperity and of a fortunate journey through life, became the church. The erotic theme of Eros and Psyche came to signify the soul’s thirst and the love of God in Jesus Christ. Hermes, a symbol of humanity, began to represent the Good Shepherd. The sleeping Endymion became Jonah under the booth.26

There is thus no doubt that the third-century church clearly accepted art as an acceptable means of communicating the truths of its message. The Christian artist’s repertoire, however, was not limited to pagan symbolism.

3.3.3 Biblical Scenes Portrayed

In addition to utilizing baptized pagan symbols and decorative motifs, the third-century church also began to paint Biblical scenes. Depictions of Old Testament Biblical narratives such as Noah and the ark and Moses striking the rock in the wilderness at the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus (3rd cent. CE); Abraham binding Isaac, Daniel and the lion’s den, and the three children in the fiery furnace at the Via Latina Catacomb (3rd cent. CE); and Jonah and the whale at the Catacomb of Callistus (3rd cent. CE) were some of the most common scenes portrayed.27 Chadwick has astutely observed that prior to the conversion of Constantine, Old Testament scenes far outnumber New Testament scenes. Additionally, the portrayal of Noah and the ark in Christian catacombs are significantly similar to a depiction of the same scene on coins that were minted in the Phrygian town Apamea, which claimed to have the remains of the ark on a nearby hill. Thus, Chadwick concludes that early Christian representations of Biblical scenes were possibly dependent


27 Jensen, Understanding Early Christian Art, 65.
upon Jewish models. However, Christian portrayals were not limited to Old Testament scenes.

New Testament scenes began to be depicted as well. These included the baptism of Jesus and the resurrection of Lazarus in Chamber 21 at the Catacomb of Callistus (3rd cent. CE); and the lowering of the paralytic through the roof for healing, Peter and Christ walking on water, and the Samaritan woman at the well portrayed at the Baptistry of Dura-Europos (256 CE).

Moreover, certain Biblical scenes took on a new symbolic significance. For example, Jonah in the belly of the whale came to signify the death of Christ and his descent into Hades, the miracle of the multiplication of the bread and fishes began to be seen as a prefiguration of the last supper, the adoration of the three Magi began to symbolize gentiles embracing the Christian faith, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead eventually foreshadowed the resurrection of Christ. One of the earliest paintings of this scene of the resurrection of Lazarus, however, raises an interesting question.

### 3.3.4 Intimations of Christological Controversy

Despite the clear evidence for the use of art by Christians at the turn of the second century, there continues to be a significant reluctance to portray Christ. Indeed, one of the earliest portrayals of the resurrection of Lazarus at the end of the second century in the Cappella greca of the Catacomb of Priscilla depicts the tomb of Lazarus, his death, his resurrection, and even one of his sisters, but fails to show Christ, the central figure of

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29 See Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 77 – 84 for a discussion of the typological interpretation of these Old Testament themes.
the story who performed the miracle.30 While the explanation for the absence of Christ in this painting and the continued reluctance of some Christians to portray him over the centuries becomes increasingly more pressing and complex from the fourth century on, at this point a simple and straightforward answer will suffice.

3.3.4.1 Strictly Symbolic Portrayal of Christ

The early funerary paintings of the catacombs were not intended to portray a precise message. They were not painted for the purpose of worship or meant to be meticulously descriptive or expressive. Furthermore, despite the flourishing of portraiture in the Roman Empire at that time, they simply did not attempt to portray Christ or the saints in any realistic manner, which helps explain why Christ was most frequently depicted as the Good Shepherd.31

Instead, these early images were merely meant to be symbolic. Indeed, poet and theologian Philip Sherrard has described them as essentially a “language of signs” that were intended to “point the way to the Christian mystery . . . of deliverance from death and sin through the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist.”32 And so, despite the fact that they have been described as “rudimentary: a few strokes in a limited spectrum of colors,”33 they nevertheless served an important function for new converts to Christianity. Alexander sums this function up succinctly, arguing that they were “meant to demonstrate, by way of historical reminders, the hope of resurrection and of a future life,

30 Alexander, Patriarch Nicephorus, 2.

31 For an excellent study of early Christian portraiture, particularly of the divine, see Jensen, Face to Face.


33 Bensançon, Forbidden Image, 110.
by illustration either of suitable episodes in the biblical narrative (resurrection of Lazarus, &c.) or of the sacraments (the Baptism and Eucharist) or of Christian symbols (the Fish, the Good Shepherd).”34 More important than a reluctance to portray Christ at this early stage, however, was an explicit conciliar prohibition of images at the beginning of the fourth century.

3.3.5 Council of Elvira and Open Conflict Over Christian Art

A local council in Elvira, Spain (ca. 300 – 306 CE) provides the first explicit evidence of open opposition to Christian art. The bishops attending this council promulgated Canon 36 which states: “It seemed good to us that paintings should not be found in churches so that what is venerated and adored not be painted on the walls.”35

3.3.5.1 Various Interpretations of Canon 36

While this canon seems straightforward in its opposition to art, it has nevertheless been interpreted in various ways. Some have argued that the canon is indicative of a fear that Christians would follow the example of their pagan peers and be led into idolatry by bowing down and worshipping the images instead of their God.36 Others have explained it as a response to the Old Testament prohibition of making graven images, arguing that the bishops believed this commandment implied the prohibition of painting any type of representation. Robert Grigg, however, has argued that the argument of this canon was

34 Alexander, Patriarch Nicephorus, 1.

35 “Placuit picturas in ecclisia esse non debere, ne quod colitur et adoratur in parietibus depingatur” cited and trans. by Anthony Gythiel in Ouspensky, Theology of Icons, I.40; see also Bigham, Early Christian Attitudes, 161 – 166.

“directed specifically against the practice of representing divinity in material form.”

Grigg goes on to note that Christian apologists argued that pagans, though they believed their images mirrored their gods, merely worshipped matter when they venerated these images. Lactantius argues that images are the material products of men and therefore destined for decay. 

Likewise, Arnobius argues that not even animals care to honor their images: “mice and cockroaches nest in them and swallows, flitting about in the temples, spatter them with their droppings.”

Thus, according to Grigg, these apologists and the members of the Council of Elvira concluded that the portrayal of the divine on church walls was an insult to God, for it circumscribed an uncircumscribable God who had no need for images. Furthermore, “it implicitly likened him to things that were dead and senseless and which, like pagan cult images, would be open to various kinds of disfigurement and decay, whether caused maliciously or naturally.”

While these interpretations all imply a sweeping prohibition of images, there has also been a more image-friendly interpretation.

In contrast to the aforementioned interpretations, Ouspensky observes their failure to take into consideration the clear evidence for images on sacred vessels and sarcophagi around the same time period, as shown above by Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria. Consequently, if this canon was meant to oppose all images it would surely not have

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37 Ibid., 431.

38 Lactantius, Divinae Institutiones, 2.2, 4, 18; trans. by Grigg in Grigg, “Aniconic Worship,” 431.

39 Arnobius, Adversus Nationes, 6.1,8,13,14; trans. by Grigg in ibid., 430 – 431.

40 Ibid., 430 – 432; see also Edwyn Bevan, Holy Images (London: 1940), 115ff.

41 See p. 58.
limited itself to opposing the images on the walls of churches. Indeed, Ouspensky argues that the fact that the canon refers only to church walls may have been “determined by practical reasons and not because it denied the sacred image on principle.” He goes on to note that the primary purpose of the Council of Elvira was to correct a number of abuses within the church, a fact that would seem to indicate that Canon 36 was simply directed against abuses of the veneration of icons in churches. Moreover, Ouspensky observes that the Council was called during the persecution of Diocletian and therefore could have simply been “an attempt to preserve ‘what is venerated and adored’ from profanation.”\(^{42}\)

Regardless of one’s interpretation of this canon, the important point is the explicit evidence it provides for the growing use of art within Christianity, as well as proof of an ongoing conflict over the issue within the Church. An even more important event, however, was about to occur that would have unimaginable consequences for the Christian Church in almost every facet of its existence, including its views toward art.

### 3.4 Constantine & the Fourth-Century Emergence of the Icon

Art historian Thomas F. Mathews asserts that “Constantine is one of a handful of figures who for better or worse have unalterably affected the course of human history.”\(^{43}\) In particular, the conversion of Constantine to Christianity in 312 CE was a momentous milestone with far-reaching ramifications. By providing official toleration to the Christian Church with the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, Constantine not only put an end to the persecution of Christians, but he also opened the way to the eventual creation of a Christian Empire. Indeed, although his conversion did not immediately lead to mass

\(^{42}\) Ouspensky, *Theology of Icon*, I.40.

conversions, it did in fact facilitate a very slow Christianization of the Empire.\textsuperscript{44} Consequently, such a transformation inevitably affected almost all areas of life, not least of which included Christian churches and art.

\textbf{3.4.1 Constantine’s Building Program}

One of the most important results of Constantine’s conversion was the initiation of a church building program.\textsuperscript{45} Following the defeat of Maxentius, Constantine ordered the construction of a whole series of churches in Rome between 312 CE and 325 CE, including, for example, the mausoleum of his mother Helena, the Lateran Basilica, and St. Peter’s. Furthermore, after 326 CE he had churches built in Antioch, Constantinople, Jerusalem and the Holy Land. The projects in the Holy Land, which included the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (associated with his mother Helena and the discovery of the true cross) and churches at Bethlehem and the Mount of Olives (associated with the ascension of Christ), not only helped establish the Holy Land as a place of pilgrimage, but the ensuing traffic of pilgrims helped revitalize the region’s economy. More importantly, however, Constantine’s conversion and church-building projects had a dramatic impact upon Christian art.

\textbf{3.4.1.1 Repercussions of Move from House Church into Basilica}

While Constantine’s conversion helped Christian art emerge from its subterranean catacombs, his church construction projects around the empire enabled the worship of Christians in small house churches to move into large basilicas. Indeed, Mathews asserts that “when Christian art graduated from its closed, private existence before the Edict of

\textsuperscript{44} Averil Cameron, \textit{The Later Roman Empire AD 284 – 430} (Cambridge, MA: University of Harvard Press, 1993), 58.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 61 – 62.
Milan to a more public existence, emblazoned in the apses and across the facades of churches, it suddenly became necessary to imagine Christ.”\textsuperscript{46} Thus, in addition to causing private worship to become much more public, the grandiosity of Constantine’s churches created a need for a more formal iconographic program to embellish these churches. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the controversy over the divinity of Christ reached a climax around this same time. The Council of Nicaea, which was convened by Constantine in 325 CE and affirmed both the full divinity and the full humanity of Christ, also created a need to develop new ways of representing Christ. Indeed, a vast and splendidous storehouse full of Christian symbols and gospel themes that had been established over the previous two centuries were ready to be expanded to meet these new needs.

3.4.1.2 Icons of Christ Emerge

Although pre-Constantinian Christian art admittedly portrayed the human figure of Christ, it did not include portrait images of him. Instead, images of Christ tended to portray him full-figured within a narrative scene that emphasized his human ministry. Additionally, he was typically represented as a philosopher or as the Good Shepherd. After Constantine, however, everything changed and for the first time a bust portrait of Jesus with a beard and halo, as well as the letters Alpha and Omega on each side of his head, appeared in the fourth century at the Catacomb of Comodilla.\textsuperscript{47}

Several explanations have been offered to explain this shift to a portraiture depiction of Christ. The traditional argument, offered by Andre Grabar, suggests that

\textsuperscript{46} Mathews, \textit{Clash of Gods}, 10.

\textsuperscript{47} Jensen, \textit{Understanding Early Christian Art}, 103.
these new images of Christ derived from the images of the Roman emperor. According to Grabar, the art of the catacombs, and even of Dura-Europos, was simply unable to express the depth of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Christians were thus forced to turn to the next best thing, which happened to be the iconography of the imperial office. The widespread portrayal of Christ as ruler, including for example the portrayal of him enthroned with the apostles in the Apse of Sta. Pudenziana in Rome (c. 400 CE), is the most frequently cited evidence for this theory. Labeling such a theory as “Emperor Mystique,” Mathews rejects this theory and argues that instead of asserting imperial imagery, Christians were merely seeking to replace the iconography of the pagan gods of antiquity with their own representatives in an effort to assert the triumph of Christianity. As a result of this effort, according to Mathews, “all the images of the ancient pantheon came tumbling down, and instead there appeared a strange collection of saints and angels that would rule the religious imagination of the West for the next millennium.”

While the reality probably included a bit of both of these theories, the new portrait images of Christ emphasized both his humanity and divinity. This image no longer sought to simply portray a biblical narrative, but instead articulated a particular message. Whether it attempted to use imperial imagery to assert the authority of Christ, or whether it sought to finalize the downfall of the pagan gods and the triumph of Christianity, it nevertheless portrayed a theological statement about who Christ was, namely both human and divine. In fact, this image became the standard portrayal of Jesus in Byzantine icons and it eventually came to be known as Christ the Pantokrator (Ruler of all). The conversion of Constantine was thus a true turning point, for it enabled a shift in the


portrayal of Christ which resulted in the emergence of the icon as a portrait image of Christ as both man and God. However, such a portrayal was still not controversy free, for a thorough break from the fear of being led astray by icons was far from complete.

3.4.2 Christological Controversy Continues

Toward the beginning of the fourth century an Alexandrian presbyter named Arius stirred up a Christological controversy. The Emperor Constantine called a council at Nicaea in 325 CE (the First Ecumenical Council) to preserve the unity of the church and the peace of the empire by temporarily settling this debate over the nature and person of Christ. The pressing question of the day was whether Christ was truly and fully God, consubstantial and equal to God the Father in all ways. This controversy, however, was not limited to the armchairs of bishops and theologians; it extended into the realm of art as well.

3.4.2.1 Eusebius Rejects Icons

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In an effort to emphasize the shift of both the form and function of images after the conversion of Constantine, I have refrained from referring to pre-Constantinian images as icons. However, it should be noted that the Greek word *eikon* translates literally as “image.” Thus, any image, including those in the catacombs or at Dura-Europos, can be called an icon. Indeed, Byzantine historian Alice-Mary Talbot notes that the Byzantine icon “included not only the narrow sense of the word, a depiction of a sacred figure on a wooden panel, but any divine representation in any medium, whether on cloth, wood, metal, parchment, fresco, or mosaic” in *Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight Saints’ Lives in English Translation* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1998), 1. Similarly, Byzantine patristics scholar Andrew Louth defines icons as “any representation of Christ, the Mother of God, or the saints (and also angels), or of the Cross ‘made of colors, pebbles, or any other material that is fit, set in the holy churches of God, on holy utensils and vestments, on walls and boards, in houses and in streets’, as the Definition of the Seventh Oecumenical Synod put it. The term ‘icon’ is not, in the context of Byzantine iconography, to be restricted to panel icons (as in current art-historical usage), but includes mosaics, frescos, manuscript illustrations, images woven into cloth, engraved on metal, carved in ivory or wood, and probably also statues, though there is little evidence for religious statues in Byzantium” in *St. John Damascene*, 194 – 195.
A letter from Eusebius of Caesarea to the Emperor Constantine’s sister Constantia provides a good clue to the new Christological contours of the debate over Christian art, particularly related to images of Christ.\textsuperscript{51} Constantia had previously requested a painted portrait of Christ from Eusebius who responded with a letter of refusal that provides some clues to his theological rationale. Eusebius writes:

Since you have written referring also to a certain icon of Christ that you wanted us to send you, which image of Christ do you mean? . . . that which is true and unchangeable and which bears the characteristics of his nature, or that which He assumed for us, the figure, that is, that He took in the form of a servant? . . . But in so far as the form of God is concerned, I do not myself think that you would ask for that, once you have been instructed by Him; because neither has one known the Father, except the Son, now will any one ever know even the Son Himself, except the Father alone, who gave birth to Him. . . . But, certainly, you are asking for an icon of the form of the servant and that of a bit of flesh, which He put on for us. . . . Who would, then, be able to draw with dead and inanimate colors, or in sketches, the glittering and sparkling scintillations which are so very precious and glorious? The divine Apostles on the mountain could not even endure to look at Him and they fell on their faces confessing that they could not bear the sight.\textsuperscript{52}

Eusebius thus argues that it is impossible to accurately and fully portray Christ. To do so would require one to portray either, on the one hand, an image of the humanity of Jesus as seen prior to his transfiguration and resurrection, or, on the other hand, to attempt to portray the impossible, namely the divine nature of Jesus as displayed at his transfiguration and after his resurrection. Hence, an icon of Christ, according to Eusebius was theologically impossible.


\textsuperscript{52} Daniel Sahas, \textit{Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm} (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1988; reprint of 1986), 134.
Despite this refusal of Eusebius to allow the portrayal of Christ, however, he nevertheless provides evidence for the existence of such images during the early fourth century. In his work, *The History of the Church*, he acknowledges that he had seen and examined the “features” of Christ and his apostles Peter and Paul as preserved in “coloured portraits.”

Hence, although controversy over the role of Christian art, particularly the portrayal of the divinity of Christ, clearly continued in the background, the conversion of Constantine and his church-building projects had led Christian art down a path that ultimately led to the icon of Christ. Indeed, the icon had emerged and despite all controversy had become a permanent fixture in the Byzantine landscape. Not only was the icon there to stay, however, but devotion to icons would increase dramatically over the next couple of centuries.

### 3.5 Justinian & the Sixth-Century Rise of Devotion to the Icon

Peter Brown, in his book *The Rise of Western Christendom*, notes that while images of holy figures had filled Christian churches since the fourth century, by the middle of the sixth century they “broke ranks.” Although the purpose of early fourth-century Christian art was primarily didactic, by the end of that century a new dimension was developing. St. Gregory of Nyssa speaks of a painting of the sacrifice of Isaac and the emotional effect it had upon him: “I have often seen this tragic event depicted in painting and could not walk by the sight of it without shedding tears, so clearly did art

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present the story to one’s eyes.”

Similarly, St. Basil the Great, in a discourse on the martyr Barlaam, states: “Arise, now before me, you iconographers of the saints’ merits. Let me be conquered by your pictures of the valiant deeds of the martyr!” However, the ability of images to provoke an emotional response was only one of several steps that helped lead Christians to a widespread devotion to icons by the sixth century. Indeed, the combined effect of the development of the cult of the cross, the devotion to relics, and the veneration of imperial portraiture was profound.

3.5.1 Cult of the Cross

Regardless of the historical reliability of Eusebius’ account of the conversion of Constantine, the significance of the role played by the symbol of the cross in the conversion of Constantine, whether actual or promulgated, cannot be underestimated. According to Eusebius in his Life of Constantine, sometime around the middle of the day prior to his victorious battle against Maxentius in 312 CE, Constantine claimed that he saw “up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said, ‘By this conquer.’” That evening, after Constantine fell asleep pondering the meaning of this vision, Christ appeared to him with this same sign

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57 Eusebius, Life of Constantine, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 1.28: 81; the authenticity of this story, as related by Eusebius, has long been debated and probably forevermore will be. Some scholars argue that it was a later fabrication used as imperial propaganda while others believe it to be basically authentic. See Kitzinger, “Cult of Images,” 90, n. 12 for bibliography of related literature.
and encouraged him to make a copy of it and to use it “as protection against the attacks of
the enemy.”  

Constantine’s newfound faith in the Christ of his vision was hardly a passive
commitment, as demonstrated by three responses.  
First, the very next morning he called
forth experts of the Christian faith to help him understand more fully who Christ was and
to explain to him the significance of the sign of the cross. These experts explained that
the sign of the cross was “a token of immortality, and was an abiding trophy of the
victory over death, which he [Jesus] had once won when he was present on earth.”
Convinced of the message of the Christian faith and the power of the sign of the cross,
Constantine decided to take immediate action.

Thus, Constantine next summoned “goldsmiths and jewelers” to construct a copy
of the sign in “gold and precious stones.” He instructed them to place on top of the cross
a wreath of gold and precious stones with the first two Greek letters of the name of Christ
inscribed upon it (χρ with chi intersecting the middle of rho – called the labarum by late
fourth-century writers), to hang from the cross bar an imperial tapestry that produced an
“impression of indescribable beauty” with the message “In this sign, conquer,” and to
attach a portrait of the emperor and his children above the tapestry.

Finally, he stationed his newly constructed trophy of the cross of Christ in front of
his army. Now committed to Christ and convinced of the power of the sign of the cross,
he confidently marched forth to face Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge. With the cross
leading the way, Constantine’s army went on to defeat the opponent. In the mind of

58 Ibid., I.29: 81.

59 Francis Dvornik notes that the sincerity of Constantine’s commitment to Christianity
can be demonstrated by the declarations he made in his official decrees; see Dvornik, The
Ecumenical Councils (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1961), 11,
Constantine, his troops, and the people, this victory was attributed to the power of the cross.

The cross was thus imbued with more meaning ever before. While it had been a symbol of Christ’s victory over the devil prior to Constantine’s conversion, it now came to also symbolize the victory of the emperor, which only served to further enhance its popularity. Indeed, by the end of the fourth century St. Asterius Amasenus makes it clear that the veneration of the cross had become a normal and acceptable practice. Though the cross may have previously been venerated on a limited basis, the identification of Christ’s victory with the victory of Constantine’s army provided a fresh impetus for widespread veneration of the cross. However, the cross was not the only object being venerated by Christians.

3.5.2 Devotion to Relics

Peter Brown, in his study The Cult of the Saints, notes that there is one thing that can be stated with certainty about the religion of late antiquity in the Mediterranean world: “it was most emphatically ‘upperworldly.’” Indeed, the ancient Mediterranean world believed in a clear separation between the stable spiritual realm of the heavens and the unstable material realm of this world. The only passage through this divide, however, was death. According to Brown, “At death, the soul would separate from a body

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62 Kitzinger, “Cult of Images,” 89.

compounded of earthly dregs, and would gain, or regain, a place intimately congruent with its true nature in the palpable, clear light that hung so tantalizingly close above the earth in the heavy clusters of the Milky Way” while the dead body, on the other hand, “joined in the instability and opacity of the world beneath the moon.”

Nevertheless, while death could indeed facilitate a crossing of these boundaries, the walls of separation still remained intact. For example, the cult of heroes, which dated back to the Mycenaeans and persisted into Roman times, still maintained a clear separation between the veneration of mortal human heroes who had tasted death and the veneration of immortal gods. The ancient Mediterranean world clung to what they perceived as strict boundaries between heaven and earth, the divine and the human, and the living and the dead. Indeed, this is why cemeteries were always placed outside the walls of cities. By the third century, however, as the rise of Christianity was gaining momentum, change was in the air.

The early Christian church’s attitude toward Christian martyrs, particularly during the persecution of the Roman Emperor Diocletian (303 – 304 CE), helped break down this wall of separation. Martyrs came to be viewed as friends of God: human beings who were intimately acquainted with the divine and thus able to intercede for and protect their fellow mortal humans. Consequently, the private tombs of these martyrs were transformed into public altars where heaven and earth could come together. Furthermore, the physical body – i.e. the relics – of the deceased martyr took on a new significance. According to the fourth-century Cappadocian, Gregory of Nyssa, Christians treasured even the dust from the martyr’s tomb. Indeed, Gregory describes the delight and privilege of those fortunate enough to have touched and honored the martyr’s relics:

64 Ibid.
Those who behold them embrace, as it were, the living body in full flower: they bring eye, mouth, ear, all the senses into play, and then, shedding tears of reverence and passion, they address to the martyr their prayers of intercession as though he were present.  

Despite the development of the cult of the cross and the devotion to relics, only one ingredient was missing. An act of piety that had been around for centuries and indeed, one that Christians had so adamantly rejected during the first three centuries that they were willing to face death before considering such a pagan practice, this final ingredient would create the perfect recipe that would finally enable Christians to cross a chasm previously far too wide to even consider peeking over.

### 3.5.3 Veneration of Portraits

The Roman art of portraiture played a significant role in the changing attitudes of Christians toward art, particularly to their willingness to portray and venerate Christ, the saints, and Mary. From the realistic portraits of the late Republican era to the idealized portraits of the early imperial era, the art of portraiture had a long-standing tradition in Rome. More important, however, were the funerary portraits that played a specific role in the domestic cult. These portraits were directly associated with the remains of the deceased and were thus used in the rituals performed to commemorate the dead – whether for a birthday or a general festival of the dead – as families and friends gathered around the tomb for a banquet. Indeed, funerary portraits were kept close to the remains of the deceased and actually represented the deceased one’s presence. It does not take much imagination to see how these funerary portraits set the stage for the devotion to relics.

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66 Jensen, *Face to Face*, 44 – 46.
However, the role of these portraits becomes even more significant when the cult of the emperor is taken into consideration.

3.5.3.1 Imperial Portraiture

Beginning with Julius Caesar, who was declared a god by the people in the middle of the first century BCE, an imperial cult developed in Rome. One of the keys to this cult, however, was the emperor’s portrait. The likeness of the image to the emperor invoked his very presence. As a result, this imperial image played a political and legal role within the empire. These portraits, according to Jensen,

Mediated presence and allowed access to power – mostly for the purpose of receiving honor, homage, or adoration, but also to establish his authority over political and legal matters. The imperial image was a vital presence that commanded fear and obedience, receiving and dispensing all that was due the emperor himself. It witnessed official acts, presided over judicial hearings, enforced laws, guaranteed oaths, dispensed clemency, and accepted gifts and sacrifices.  

So, the portrait of the emperor enabled him to defy his human limitations and become an omnipresent ruler.

Despite Christianity’s aversion to idolatry and Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, the role of imperial images remained essentially the same within the empire. Although sacrifices were no longer offered to them, they continued to be venerated. To commemorate the birthday of the founding of his capital city, for example, the Christian Emperor Constantine himself, according to the sixth-century chronicler Malalas, instituted an annual procession that carried his own image and ordered all future emperors to bow before it. Furthermore, in contrast to Christians of the first three

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67 Ibid., 52.

centuries who had refused to venerate the imperial images despite the threat of death, by the end of the fourth century, the Cappadocian Fathers saw no problem in venerating the emperor’s image. Indeed, Basil the Great (330 379 CE) provides the classic argument in his work *On the Holy Spirit*. According to Basil, the veneration given to the image of the emperor does not honor the image per se, but rather passes on to the prototype of the image, i.e. the emperor himself. Thus, Basil makes it quite clear that the veneration of the imperial image was a standard acceptable practice by his time in the later fourth century. Indeed, as Kitzinger concludes, “There is no lack of evidence that the traditional worship of the imperial portrait suffered little if any interruption through the triumph of Christianity.” The consequence of the development of the cult of the cross and the devotion to relics in the third- and fourth-century church, combined with the renewed veneration of imperial portraiture, this time by Christians, opened the door for a widespread popularization of icons in the Byzantine Empire.

3.5.4 *Hagia Sophia Leads an Icon Invasion*

Christmas day of the year 537 CE was yet another turning point for Christian art. Initially built by Constantius II in 360 CE and known as the Great Church, it was burned down in 404 CE, possibly by supporters of John Chrysostom. Theodosios II completed a rebuilding of it in 415 CE and by 430 it had come to be known as *Hagia Sophia*. However, this second construction was also destroyed by fire during the Nika Revolt

69 St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 72; this theme of images and prototypes will become an important discussion in the later iconoclastic debate.

70 Kitzinger, “Cult of Images,” 91.
against Justinian I in 532 CE. Justinian I immediately initiated reconstruction and the new cathedral was opened and dedicated on Dec. 25, 537 CE. This grand cathedral – one of the great architectural achievements of the world – would lead the way in yet another development of Christian art. While the icon had emerged out of the pre-Constantinian art with the conversion of Constantine and his church-building projects in the form of portrait images, the dedication of *Hagia Sophia* facilitated a new mobility for the icon.

Art historian Thomas Mathews notes that icons now “invaded the very sanctuary space of the Church.”\(^{71}\) A series of silver relief icons of Christ, his mother Mary, angels, prophets, and apostles with oil lamps burning before them moved onto the *templon*, a screen that separated the nave from the sanctuary (today referred to as an iconostasis). Furthermore, larger than life icons of Christ, Mary, and the saints began to peer out of the apse over the altar toward the congregation. Mathews concludes that this “altered decisively the Christian religious experience, interposing images between the worshipper and the holiest sacrament of the altar.”\(^{72}\) Indeed, these images invited the congregation to join them in the heavenly liturgy and to present their petitions to them. The mobility and venerability of these inviting images, however, was not restricted solely to the interior of *Hagia Sophia*.

In addition to moving onto the iconostasis and the apse over the altar, icons also came off the walls and moved out of the church. According to Kitzinger, the Christian icon “began to assume a role more central, a function more vital in everyday life.”\(^{73}\)


\(^{72}\) Ibid.

\(^{73}\) Kitzinger, “Cult of Images,” 87.
Historian Judith Herrin concurs with this conclusion, noting that by the end of the sixth century, icons had “penetrate[d] all levels of Byzantine society, compelling a devotion in emperors and patriarchs, bishops and craftsmen, women and soldiers, monks and peasants.”74 Indeed, icons now began to both invade every level of Byzantine life, both public and private and to receive the veneration from all levels of society that had previously been given to the cross, to relics, and to the imperial portrait.

3.5.4.1 Emperors

Many emperors of Byzantium were devoted to icons. This devotion dates back to at least the fifth century when Leo I (457 – 74 CE) had himself and his wife depicted in a mosaic around an enthroned Mary in the apse of the Blachernai church in Constantinople. The next century Justinian (527 – 565 CE) and Theodora were portrayed with the Virgin Mary on embroidered curtains at Hagia Sophia and Justin II (565 – 578 CE) placed a mosaic of Christ enthroned above his throne in the Chrysotriklinos, the golden reception room of the Great Palace. A century later, Justinian II (685 – 695 CE) changed the images on the empire’s third issue of gold coins (the solidus or nomisma). Traditionally, coins had a bust of the emperor on one side and either a cross, a Victory in profile, or a frontal angel on the other side. Under Justinian II, however, one side of the coin began depicting Christ as a bearded Pantokrator (Ruler of All) with the inscription “Christ is King of Kings,” while the other side portrayed the emperor standing and holding a cross with the inscription “Servant of Christ.” Icons of Christ, Mary, and the saints had indeed

become integrated into the court and ceremonies of the Byzantine emperors by the sixth century.\textsuperscript{75}

3.5.4.2 Ecclesiastics

Icons were also integrated into the ceremonies and activities of the clergy. For six years, from 554 to 560 CE, for example, a group of priests traveled from city to city to raise money to repair a church and village that had been destroyed by a barbarian raid. As the priests marched through a city they carried a copy of the miraculous icon of Christ from Camuliana.\textsuperscript{76} Another instance can be seen in a public theological dispute in 656 CE at Bithynian Bizna. The Caesarean Bishop Theodosius was attempting to convert Maximus the Confessor to the official policy of Monothelitism and after much debate and discussion, they stood up, prayed, and then proceeded to kiss the gospel book, the cross, and icons of Christ and the Virgin Mary.\textsuperscript{77}

3.5.4.3 Military

The military also proved to be devoted to icons during the sixth and seventh centuries. Indeed, icons were frequently used by the military as \textit{palladia}. During the Persian siege of Edess in 544 CE, an icon of Christ was claimed as the source of victory. According to the \textit{Ecclesiastical History} of Evagrius, water was sprinkled on the image of Christ and then the icon kindled a fire to consume a hill that had been built by the

\textsuperscript{75} For an excellent examination of the integration of icons and religious ceremony into the imperial court, see Averil Cameron, “Images of Authority: Elites and Icons in Late Sixth-Century Byzantium,” in \textit{Byzantium and the Classical Tradition: University of Birmingham Thirteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies 1979}, ed. Martaret Mullett and Roger Scott (Birmingham: Centre for Byzantine Studies Univ. Birmingham, 1981), 205 – 234.

\textsuperscript{76} Kitzinger, “Cult of Images,” 99 – 100.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 99.
Persians as an assault tower. Further evidence is demonstrated by an icon of Christ that was used by the Emperor Heraclius during the campaign against the Perians in 622 CE.

The poet George the Pisidian accompanied Heraclius on this campaign and addressed the following lines to him:

You took the divine and venerable figure of the unpainted image, not painted by [human] hands. The Logos, which forms and creates all, appears in the image as a form without painting. He once took form without seed and now without painting, so that by both these forms of the Logos the faith in the Incarnation might be confirmed and the error of dreamers might be confounded. You offered this figure painted [or willed] by God, whom you trusted, as a first divine sacrifice for the battle. [When the army acclaimed you during the campaign, lowered their standards and demanded to hear your address before the battle,] you took the awesome image of the figure painted by God in your hand and spoke briefly. This one [not I] is the universal emperor and lord and general of our armies. . . . We, his creatures, must enter the field of battle against enemies who worship created [idols].

During the siege of Consantinople by the Avars in 626 CE, while Heraclius was away fighting the Persians, Theodore Synkellos tells us that the patriarch took similar action:

On all the gates of the west of the city, whence the monstrous brood of darkness came, the venerable patriarch had painted like a sun that drives away the darkness with its rays, images of the holy figures of the Virgin with the Lord her Son on her arm, and cried with a terrible voice to the masses of the barbarians and their demons: “You wage war against these very images. . . . But a woman, the Mother of God, will at one stroke crush your temerity and assume command, for she is truly the mother of him who drowned Pharaoh and his whole army in the Red Sea.”

After eight days of battle, Theodore Synkellos continues, “the Virgin and Mother of God broke with one assault the power of both enemies [the Avars and the Persians].” Thus,

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78 Trans. by Kitzinger in ibid., 103 – 104.


80 Theodore Synkellos, sermon on the siege of the city, trans. by Belting in Belting, Likeness and Presence, 495 – 496.

81 Ibid.
emperors, soldiers, patriarchs and people alike sought the presence and protection from God through icons during times of battle and distress during the sixth and seventh centuries. In Peter Brown’s words, “The solemn movement of an image seemed to make it live, as it swayed above the crowd. To the Iconophiles, images of this kind guaranteed the presence, on earth, of the supernatural protectors whom they represented.”

The presence and power of Christ, his Mother Mary, and the saints, however, were not only sought through icons in the public realm of emperors, ecclesiastics and the military, but in the private realm as well.

3.5.4.4 Artisans, Monks and Women

Just as pagans had made their gods present through portable pictures and statues, the Byzantines now too sought to make Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints present to them in the privacy of their homes or work sites to hear their prayers and needs. As Brown has argued, just as “holy men” of previous generations in eastern Christianity had made present the power and love of a distant God through their miracles and preaching (similar to the role relics played in the west), now icons could perform the same function. The Life of Symeon the Younger, for example, tells the story of an artisan of Antioch whose illness had been cured by Symeon. Out of gratitude and a desire to keep the presence and power of Symeon close by, this artisan placed an icon of him in a very conspicuous and public place above the door of his workshop and decorated it with

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82 Brown, Rise of Western Christendom, 389.

Another story is told by John Moschus of a monk who, before traveling, always prayed for a safe and prosperous journey to an icon of the Virgin Mother and Child Jesus with a candle before it. An even more poignant story recounts a woman of Rhosopolis in Cilicia named Theotekna who had been barren for twenty years and was demon possessed. After seeking help from St. Symeon, who drove the demon out and healed her infertility, she returned home and set up an icon of St. Symeon. The icon, according to The Life of Symeon the Younger, “worked miracles, being overshadowed over by the holy spirit that dwelled in the Saint, so that demoniacs were cleansed there, and persons afflicted with various diseases were healed.” A woman who had been ill for fifteen years came to see the icon. Her disease was immediately healed “For she had said to herself, ‘If only I see his likeness, I shall be saved.’” Icons were thus prayed to for assistance and honored out of gratitude for assistance. They were especially important for women who, independent of the church liturgy and clergy, were thus able to express their Christian devotion in the privacy of their homes.

3.6 Catacombs to Icons

Peter Brown sums up the status of icons by the end of the sixth century:

The new images came to be placed, by themselves, in prominent positions: at the doors of shrines, at special places in churches, in public places, outside shops, and

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84 Life of Symeon the Younger, trans. by Mango in Mango, Art of Byzantine Empire, 134.


86 Life of Symeon, trans. by Mango in Mango, Art of Byzantine Empire, 134.

87 Ibid.

in privileged places within Christian homes. Even when they were still part of the overall décor of churches, they were made to look special by being placed in separate panels. This made them “holy” images. They received gestures of veneration: believers bowed deeply before them, kissed them, burnt lights and incense before them, even nailed votive objects to them, as tokens of their power.\footnote{Brown, \textit{Rise of Western Christendom}, 388.}

Christian art had clearly come a long way. Although a lack of material and literary evidence during the first two centuries precludes a solid conclusion to the status of Christian art during that period, the 20\textsuperscript{th} century archaeological discovery of Christian art in a private home at the baptistery of Dura-Europos provides a good clue to the likelihood of a far greater presence of Christian art than traditionally thought during this early period. Regardless of one’s conclusion to this debatable subject, the catacomb paintings provide conclusive evidence of a symbolic and biblical narrative Christian art in funerary settings from the third century until the fifth century. By the fourth-century, the conversion of Constantine and his building programs initiated the development of the icon as a distinct form of Christian art. By the sixth century, the veneration of crosses, relics, and imperial portraits helped facilitate a rise of popular devotion to icons.

The veneration of icons had indeed become such an established practice and had assumed such a prominent role in the lives of the faithful that abuse was inevitable. Ouspensky notes several instances of such abuses: some Christians attempted to earn their salvation by decorating their churches with great zeal; icons were sometimes chosen to serve as godparents at a baptism or monastic tonsure; some priests celebrated the liturgy on an icon instead of an altar; and, some priests even scraped the paint off of icons to mix it with the Eucharistic elements in an attempt to fully sanctify them.\footnote{Ouspensky, \textit{Theology of Icon}, I.103.} Practices

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\footnote{Brown, \textit{Rise of Western Christendom}, 388.}

\footnote{Ouspensky, \textit{Theology of Icon}, I.103.}
such as these certainly must have caused some clergy members to question the direction icons were taking the church. Hence, as devotion to icons increased the potential for abuse and the possibility of intensified controversy likewise increased.

Indeed, while the evolution of Christian art from the catacombs to the veneration of icons had not been a smooth ride, it was only going to get bumpier as the seventh century drew to a close. Kitzinger was in fact correct in his conclusion that there had been a continual conflict, “an undercurrent of at least potential iconoclasm . . . through the entire history of the Church.”91 As Kitzinger so effectively articulated it, “Defense lagged behind attack, as attack had lagged behind practice.”92 There had been plenty of practice, continual conflict, but limited defense. The time was ripe for defense. However, before exploring the contours of the Christian Church’s defense for icons, a very brief and chronological overview of the two periods of the eighth- and ninth-century Byzantine iconoclastic controversy will hopefully help orient the reader.

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91 Kitzinger, “Cult of Images,” 85.

92 Ibid., 87.
INTERLUDE

CHAPTER 4

CONFLICT & TRIUMPH: A BRIEF SKETCH

The Byzantine East is the only geographical region of the Christian world where the problem of images created a theological debate lasting for more than a century.

John Meyendorff
Christ in Eastern Christian Thought

4.1 Round 1: 726 – 787 CE

Orthodox Churches around the world have celebrated the final triumph of icons annually on the first Sunday of Lent for almost 1200 years. This triumph was the culmination of over 120 years of fierce controversy over the role icons should play in the Christian Church. The Byzantine debate erupted in 726 CE outside the Chalke gateway, the main entrance to the imperial palace of Constantinople, where a vast golden icon of Christ standing full-length on a footstool was mounted on the façade above its bronze portals and gilded bronze tiled roof for which it was named (chalkeios = copper or bronze).\(^1\) It was this icon, possibly the largest and most grandiose of all the icons in the capital city, that was singled out by Emperor Leo III to be publicly removed, thus initiating the first of two periods of imperial iconoclasm. Within four years, Leo III issued an official edict ordering the destruction of icons (730 CE). Furthermore, he

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exiled the iconophiles Patriarch Germanus who had refused to sign such a decree and replaced him with Anastasius who, in contrast to Germanus, was willing to implicate the Church in the Empire’s iconoclastic policy in exchange for the patriarchal post.\(^2\)

Despite the presence of iconophile writings during this first period of iconoclasm, including the most famous icon apologist St. John of Damascus, iconoclastic policy was enforced even more strictly when Leo III’s son, Constantine V, became Emperor in 741 CE. Under Emperor Constantine V, persecution of the iconophiles expanded significantly, particularly focusing on the monks whom Constantine rightly regarded as the most stubborn and threatening defenders of icons. To tighten his iconoclastic grip even further, Constantine V called a church council in 754 CE at the palace of Hiereia, a suburb of Constantinople, to solidify the church’s endorsement of his policy. Under the powerful sway of Constantine V, the 338 attending bishops agreed to Constantine’s iconoclast terms and anathematized the Patriarch Germanus and the monks George of Cyprus and John of Damascus. The state and church were now harmoniously working together to rid the Empire of icons.

Although iconoclast policy remained intact after the death of Constantine V (775 CE) under the leadership of his son Leo IV (r. 775 – 780 CE), this reign would serendipitously, but temporarily, lead to the undoing of iconoclast policy. Indeed, unlike his father, Leo IV did not have a passion to persecute the iconophiles, at least in part due to the fact that he was married to Irene, an avid iconophile herself. Parry conjectures that it is likely that she not only influenced her husband to loosen enforcement of the policy, but even encouraged him to release iconophile prisoners and put an end to the persecution

\(^2\) Parry, *Depicting the Word*, 10 – 11; the remaining summary of the first period of iconoclasm is heavily indebted to the first chapter of Parry’s book, *Depicting the Word*, which offers an excellent and concise summary of the two periods on pp. 10 – 15.
of iconophile monks.³ When Leo IV died (780 CE), his son Constantine VI was too young to assume the throne, leaving Irene to temporarily fill the void. With an iconophile patriarch (Tarasios) at her side, the Empress Irene called a church council in 786 CE to refute the iconoclastic policy promulgated at the Council of Hieria in 754 CE.

Despite the interruption of the initial meeting in Constantinople by iconoclast troops, Irene successfully replaced them with more loyal troops and reconvened the council in 787 CE at the Hagia Sophia church in Nicaea. Attended by 350 bishops, many monks, two papal legates, and two representatives of the eastern patriarchs, this council, which would later be known as the Seventh Ecumenical Council, refuted the entire definition of the Council of Hieria point-by-point and ended the course of the first period of iconoclasm.

4.2 Round 2: 813 – 843 CE

Although the second council of Nicaea decreed an end to the imperial policy of iconoclasm, this truce would be short-lived. Irene’s son Constantine VI eventually took the throne in 790 CE, only to be removed seven years later by his mother Irene. Consequently, she became the sole ruler of the empire until she too was removed and replaced by the Emperor Nikephoros I in 802 CE. Though Constantine VI seems to have been sympathetic to the iconoclastic cause, he never reinstituted the policy and it was under his reign that Nikephorus, the defender of icons, became patriarch in 806 CE. The Emperor Nikephorus’ son-in-law, Michael I, became emperor in 811 CE and only two years later he would be followed by Leo V, the emperor responsible for initiating the second period of official imperial iconoclastic policy.

³ Parry, Depicting the Word, 12.
After a failed attempt to reach a compromise with the patriarch Nikephorus during the debates of 806 – 815 CE (e.g. take down icons that are low enough to be kissed, leaving only icons up high to be used for didactic and inspirational purposes), the emperor Leo V deposed the Patriarch Nikephorus and replaced him with the iconoclastic Patriarch Theodotus I. Supported by the iconoclastic *florilegium* compiled by John the Grammarian, the monastic superior of the monastery of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople, and influenced by the idea that the empire had historically been stronger when icons, and thus idolatry, were outlawed, the emperor Leo V called a church council in 815 CE. This council rejected the decrees of the second Council of Nicaea of 787 CE, named the iconoclastic council of 754 CE the true Seventh Ecumenical Council, and reiterated its decrees. Theodore the Studite, the monastic superior of the monastery of Studios, picked up where the Patriarch Nikephorus had left off and led the iconophile resistance. However, he too, following his opposition to the council of 815 CE, was exiled and replaced by an iconoclast monastic superior.

Yet another attempt at compromise was attempted when Michael II came to the throne in 821 CE and allowed Theodore the Studite and other iconophile exiles to return to Constantinople. However, Nikephorus was not allowed to return to his patriarchal position because he refused to remain neutral on the issue, a conditional prerequisite imposed by Michael II. Moreover, Theodore the Studite was exiled once again for refusing to discuss the issue with heretics in a synod of both parties. Shortly thereafter, Emperor Michael II’s son, Theophilus, who had been tutored by the iconoclast John the Grammarian, revived the persecution of iconophiles when he took the throne in 829 CE and made John the Grammarian the patriarch in 837 CE. However, like the first period, serendipity would have its way once again.
The Emperor Theophilus had no idea what kind of ramifications his marriage to Theodora in 830 CE would have. Indeed, like Irene, Theodora would eventually be responsible for the defeat of iconoclasm. When Theophilus died in 842 CE, the only remaining opponent of icons with any power was the patriarch John the Grammarian. However, with Theodora assuming power upon the death of Theophilus for her minor son Michael III, and with the replacement of the patriarch John the Grammarian with the iconophile Methodius in 843 CE, the stage was set for the final overthrow of imperial iconoclastic policy.

Shortly after appointing Methodius to the patriarchate, Theodora summoned a pivotal synod on March 11, 843 CE in which the official iconophile position of the Church was pronounced. Indeed, this council reaffirmed the decisions made at the Seventh Ecumenical Council, restored the veneration of icons, and anathematized the iconoclasts. It is this synod that is commemorated by Orthodox Churches every year on the first Sunday of Lent – now known as the “Triumph of Orthodoxy.” Following a procession around the church with icons, the service concludes with the proclamation of the Synodikon:

As the Prophets have known; as the Apostles have taught; as the Church has received; as the Teachers have defined; as the universe has consented; as the grace has shown; as the truth has manifested; as falsehood has been lashed out; as the wisdom was explicated; as Christ has praised, this way we also think of, this way we speak of, this way we confess Christ our true God and His holy saints: to honour them by means of words, of writings, of gestures, of sacrifices, of churches, of icons. And as far as Christ is concerned, to bow down to Him and revere Him as Lord; and as for the others, to honour them as true servants of His, and pay to them a relative veneration, for having, all of us, a common Lord.4

PART III – BYZANTINE DEBATE

CHAPTER FIVE

PATRIARCH GERMANUS & EMPEROR LEO III:
THE DEBATE BEGINS

To Germanus, the double-minded and worshipper of wood, anathema.
Council of Hiereia (754 CE)

Everlasting remembrance for Germanus, the orthodox believer.
Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 CE)

With power, you brought about the collapse of the proud impiety of Leo, who
had wretchedly forbidden us to venerate the icons of Christ and the Saints.
Vespers, May 12

5.1 Theological Foundation of the Icon

By the seventh century Christian art had long been out of the catacombs and
house churches. Indeed, portable icons were widespread and the veneration of them, both
in public and private, had become common practice. The opposition to Christian art,
though present throughout its history, had thus far been a minority voice in the
background and consequently unable to curb its evolution. For the most part, in fact, the
Church had paid little attention to the issue; its mind had been on other matters.

By the end of the seventh century, however, the focus of the Church began to
expand and the icon found itself caught up in the Christological debates of the day. With
the practice of icon veneration firmly established in Byzantium, an attack on icons was
about to be launched by the emperor himself. However, this attack would provoke a
defense from the patriarch who would reiterate the Christological foundation of the icon
articulated at the Council of Trullo. Indeed, the Byzantine debate was about to begin
with Patriarch Germanus squaring off with Emperor Leo III.
5.1.1 Councils & Christology

During the key period of Christian art’s evolution (i.e. from the early fourth century to the seventh century), the Christian Church was engaged in a series of controversies over the person and nature of Christ. The primary vehicle used to settle such questions was an Ecumenical Council, defined by The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church as an “assembl[y] of bishops and other ecclesiastical representatives of the whole world whose decisions on doctrine, cultus, discipline, etc., are considered binding on all Christians.”1 Hence, bishops and ecclesiastical representatives from around the inhabited world (The Greek word for ecumenical – oikoumene – means the whole inhabited world) were summoned by the Church on numerous occasions to address the doctrine of Christ.

5.1.1.1 Seven Ecumenical Councils

The Christian Church convened Seven Ecumenical Councils over a period of 462 years (325 CE to 787 CE). The first two Ecumenical Councils (Nicaea I in 325 CE and Constantinople I in 381 CE) were focused primarily on defending the full divinity of Christ, the next four (Ephesus in 431 CE, Chalcedon in 451 CE, Constantinople II in 553 CE, and Constantinople III in 680 CE) were focused on articulating the relationship between the divine and human natures and wills of Christ, and the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicaea II in 787 CE) focused on icons, though this too was essentially related to the Christological controversies of the previous 400 years.

5.1.1.2 Quinisext Council

It is important to remember, however, that the role of these Ecumenical Councils was not solely theological. In 691 CE, a church council was called to complete the work of the two previous Ecumenical Councils. The Fifth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils had focused solely on the Christological questions at hand and thus failed to fulfill their responsibility in addressing disciplinary questions. Hence, the purpose of this new council was to remedy that failure. In an attempt to affirm the ecumenicity of this council and it relationship to the previous two, it was later given the title “Quinisext Council” (Quinisext is Latin for “Fifth-Sixth”).² It has also been referred to as the Council in Trullo since it met in the Domed Hall (Trullo is Latin for domed) of the imperial palace in Constantinople. The council met from the end of 691 CE until September 1, 692 CE and issued 102 decrees dealing with the clergy, monasticism, and the laity: the first section, related to the clergy and monasticism, deals with issues such as ordination (canon 14), clerical dress (canon 27), simony (canons 22 and 23), monastic stability (canon 46), and monastic property (canon 49); the second section, related to the laity, deals with matters of marriage (canons 53, 54, and 72), prostitution (canon 86), dice playing (canon 50), manumission of slaves (canon 85), sorcery and bear training (canon 61), and religious representation (canon 82).

5.1.2 The Opening of the Debate

Most historians define the outset of the iconoclastic controversy by the first imperial decree against icons issued by the Emperor Leo III in 730 CE. However, following the lead of art historian Charles Barber, a more appropriate date for the origin of this Byzantine debate is 692 CE when the 82nd canon of the Quinisext Council was

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² In contrast to smaller local councils, only Ecumenical Councils were given numerical names. This claim of ecumenicity will later be questioned and denied by the iconoclasts.
issued. This canon holds immense significance for the subject at hand because it is the first official conciliar statement by the Christian Church that not only offers a positive view toward icons and their veneration, but even goes so far as to prohibit symbolic art. Furthermore, and more importantly, this canon for the first time officially establishes a relationship between art and the Christological controversies of the previous Councils. The canon states:

In some depictions of the venerable images, the Forerunner is portrayed pointing with his finger to a lamb, and this has been accepted as a representation of grace, prefiguring for us through the law the true Lamb, Christ our God. Venerating, then, these ancient representations and foreshadowings as symbols and prefigurations of truth handed down by the Church, nevertheless, we prefer grace and truth, which we have received as fulfillment of the law. Therefore, in order that what is perfect, even in paintings, may be portrayed before the eyes of all, we decree that henceforth the figure of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, Christ our God, should be set forth in images in human form, instead of the ancient lamb; for in this way we apprehend the depth of the humility of the Word of God, and are led to the remembrance of his life in the flesh, his passion and his saving death, and of the redemption which thereby came to the world.  

While the focus of the canon was only upon the symbol of the Lamb, the implications of the canon were much more extensive.

5.1.2.1 Implications of Canon 82

Barber summarizes the implications of this canon with four observations. First, there are “potential theological consequences in the choice of an iconography.” Second, it “introduces a need to police the visual,” thereby introducing the very possibility of iconoclasm. Third, it “makes the body of Christ central to the definition of Christian representation, with symbolic representation of an incarnate being considered invalid.” Fourth, it implies a “privileging of New Testament knowledge over that of the Old

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3 Barber, Figure and Likeness, 40.

Testament. The Incarnation is understood to mark a change, which differentiates prophetic knowing from the knowledge that comes with the fulfillment of prophecy.”

Essentially then, this canon presented a theological position that stressed the theological ramifications of the manner in which one portrays God.

The delegates of the first six Ecumenical Councils had struggled to understand and define the nature and person of Christ by means of words only. Canon 82 now opened the door for the same struggle to also be conducted through visual images. Indeed, icons now became theological texts that could be used to explore and articulate Christological doctrine. According to Kitzinger, this canon made “palpable the Incarnation of the Logos in Christ” and was “used as gauntlet, as a challenge to those whose Christological views were not in agreement with orthodox dogma.”

The focus of the Church had indeed begun to expand, now incorporating the Christological controversies into the debate over icons. The effect of this shift would be devastating. A floodgate of controversy was about to burst open and the Patriarch of Constantinople would find himself in the center of it.

5.2 Patriarch Germanus

Born into a noble family (ca. 641 CE) near Constantinople, the life of Germanus was destined to be full of strife. Controversy seemed to be magnetically drawn to his family. Although his father Justinian held high office as *patrikios* under the Emperor

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5 Barber, *Figure and Likeness*, 45 – 46.

6 Kitzinger, “Cult of Images,” 121.

7 Etymologically connected with the Roman status of *patricius*. An honorific title introduced by Constantine I and, according to the fifth-century historian Zosimus, the *patrikios* was placed above the Praetorian Prefect. Although the title became more important in the West, Justinian I made it available to all *Illustræ* (major official such as Praetorian Prefect, Urban Prefect, *Magister Militum*, Consuls, *Patrikioi*, and all senators).
Heraclius (r. 610 – 641 CE) and was considered one of the emperor’s favorites – possibly even a relative\(^8\) – such credentials did not provide immunity to the constantly shifting tides of favor and disfavor so characteristic of the ongoing dynastic strife of the times. Indeed, in 668 CE, Germanus’ father Justinian was implicated in the assassination of Heraclius’ grandson, Emperor Constans II (r. 641 – 668 CE). Consequently, a swift punishment of execution fell upon Germanus’ father from the hands of Constans II’s son and successor, Emperor Constantine IV (r. 668 – 685).

While Germanus probably would have pursued a political career like his father, this incident dashed any such hopes. Instead, he suffered the consequences for his father’s betrayal. Although he was allowed to keep possession of his family’s property near Constantinople at Platanion, Emperor Constantine IV ordered the castration of Germanus. Such punishment, though brutal and inconceivable to modern western ears, was a common imperial method used to eliminate potential future dynastic rivalries. However, such a punishment also paved the way for a new career for Germanus.

### 5.2.1 Priest to Patriarch

With the possibility of a political career now ruled out, Germanus was forced into an ecclesiastical career at the age of twenty. Initially, he was assigned to serve as one of the hundreds of priests at the magnificent liturgical center of the capital in the *Hagia Sophia* cathedral.\(^9\) However, he eventually became a leader among the clergy and took an active role in maintaining the traditions and theology of the Church. Indeed, he played

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a significant role under Emperor Constantine IV in convoking the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople II in 681 CE that condemned Monotheletism (Christ has only one will, a divine one) and, as a result, was nominated metropolitan bishop of Cyzicus.\(^\text{10}\) By 715 CE, he was elected to the highest ecclesiastical position of the church in the Byzantine Empire, the Patriarch of Constantinople. Yet despite the fact that he had begun a new life and excelled as an ecclesiastical leader, he continued to find himself in difficult positions, both early in life as bishop and late in life as patriarch.

5.3 Emperor Philippicus Revives Monotheletism

An army officer named Philippicus, after assassinating Emperor Justinian II (r. 685 – 695 and 705 – 711 CE) in 711 CE, assumed the throne of emperor. Despite the fact that his reign was short and full of troubles, it was a significant reign because it revived the Christological controversies and foreshadowed the coming controversy over icons. Emperor Philippicus called a local synod in 712 CE to reject the decisions of the Sixth Ecumenical Council. This synod was attended by the upper clergy of the Byzantine Empire, including the bishop Germanus who had played a pivotal role in convening the Sixth Ecumenical Council. Germanus thus found himself in a complicated position. He had already tasted the consequences for disloyalty to the emperor once through the experience with his father and he was not ready to suffer them again. As a result, along with most of the other clergy members, he acquiesced to the emperor and signed the decree. Monotheletism was thus established as the official position of the Empire.

5.3.1 Imperial Iconoclasm Foreshadowed

\(^{10}\) It has also been suggested that Germanus may have played a role in the Quinisext Council. See Germanos, *On Predestined Terms of Life*, trans. Charles Garton and Leendert G. Westerink (Buffalo: Dept. of Classics Clemens Hall State Univ of New York, 1979), vii.
The more significant act, however, was the way Emperor Philippicus reinforced this new policy. After destroying a depiction of the Sixth Ecumenical Council in the imperial palace and removing an inscription from the Milton gate in front of the palace that commemorated the same council, he reasserted his imperial authority by replacing them with portraits of himself and the Patriarch Sergius. This act of Emperor Philippicus thus foreshadowed the imperial iconoclasm that was to come for it provided a model for a future emperor to follow.

5.4 Emperor Leo III

As a young soldier in 705 CE, Leo helped Justinian II reclaim the emperor’s throne. As a result, Leo quickly rose to prominence in the army. Under Emperor Anastasius II (713 – 715 CE) he became the general (strategos: the most powerful men in the Byzantine Empire, next to the emperor, during the eighth century) of the Anatolikon theme and in 716 CE he seized the throne from Emperor Theodosius III (715 – 716 CE).

Germanus had now been the patriarch of Constantinople for a year. Once again, he found himself in the middle of a complicated situation. He had learned his lesson under Emperor Philippicus, however, and now that orthodox doctrine had been restored under Anastasios II (713 – 715 CE), he was determined to not make the same mistake twice. This time he not only helped negotiate a bloodless overthrow but he also convinced Leo to promise that he would not introduce any innovations in the doctrine of the church. Pleased with Leo’s willingness to make such a pledge, Patriarch Germanus proceeded to crown him emperor in the Hagia Sophia cathedral.

Although Leo had the alliance of Ardavasdos, the general of the Armeniakon theme, he faced the threat of revolt from the other theme generals. An astute leader who understood the situation all too well – he had been a general who seized the throne – Leo established his position by dividing the larger themes into smaller units and thereby diminishing the power of the generals.
5.4.1 Arab Siege of Constantinople (717 CE)

The following spring, Arab armies were en route to launch an attack against Constantinople. Emperor Leo III prepared the military to defend the city and led a procession to the sea walls holding a cross. When he arrived at the sea, he struck the waters to drive away the invading Arabs in imitation of Moses during the exodus of the Israelites. Patriarch Germanus and the clergy, on the other hand, processed around the city walls carrying icons (as had been done in the siege of 626 CE). The following year on August 15, which happened to be the Feast of the Dormition of Mary, the Arab armies began their retreat. On the eve of the Feast of the Dormition the following year, and every year thereafter, Germanus led an all night vigil during which he gave thanks to the Virgin Mary for the deliverance of the capital and preached a sermon that also identified her role in saving the city.

5.4.1.1 Emperor with Cross vs. Patriarch with Icon

What Patriarch Germanus did not include in these prayers and sermons, however, is of far more significance. He never made mention of the role Emperor Leo III and his procession with the cross may have played. Hence, Herrin concludes that the prayers and sermons of Patriarch Germanus reminded Emperor Leo III annually that his “imperial strategy and skill, as well as his own belief in the authority of the cross, had nothing to do with the triumph of 718.”12 This naturally led to a growing enmity between emperor and patriarch, between cross and icon, and it was an intimation of things to come. Indeed, relations between the emperor and patriarch had not started off very smoothly, they were in no way improving, and they were heading for an impasse.

5.4.2 Depleted Byzantine Morale

Byzantine morale sank to an all-time low during the second decade of the eighth century. The Empire had been dealing with military invasions for over a century and they had become well acquainted with Islamic violence. The Arab siege of Constantinople in 717 CE produced the circulation of apocalyptic stories in the capital predicting the coming reign of the anti-Christ.\textsuperscript{13} When a volcano erupted on the island of Thera in the summer of 726 CE, the people could not help but wonder if they had done something to displease the divine Judge.\textsuperscript{14} Nobody was thinking about this possibility more than the man who was supposed to be the divine representative to the people, the man upon whose shoulders the burden and responsibility of managing the empire rested.

The volcanic eruption of Thera was the final straw for Emperor Leo III. It could mean only one thing: the wrath of God was being poured out upon the Byzantine Empire and it was his job to find the cause. The Byzantines were well versed in the Old Testament. They had long viewed themselves as the new Israel and they were all too aware of the consequences Israel repeatedly suffered for their idolatry. The Old Testament prohibition of idolatry had already been employed against Christian art repeatedly during the previous seven centuries. Hence, the easiest explanation was clearly the idolatry of widespread veneration of icons and this in fact soon became the foundation of early iconoclast thought.

\textbf{5.4.3 First Imperial Iconoclastic Act}

The accumulation of crises throughout the empire and the depleted morale of the Byzantines led to Emperor Leo III’s first iconoclastic act. In 726 CE, following the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 319; these stories had circulated around the empire in the seventh century, but this was the first time they had made it to Constantinople.

\textsuperscript{14} Theophanes, \textit{Chronicle}, 559.
volcanic eruption, he ordered the removal and destruction of the icon of Christ over the Chalke gate of the imperial palace. Just as the icon of the Virgin that Patriarch Germanus had marched around with during the Arab siege of 717 became symbolic of her protection over the city for the Patriarch and the iconophiles, this icon of Christ represented the protection of God. In contrast, just as Emperor Leo III had embraced the cross as the symbol of protection during the Arab siege, now too he turned to the cross as a replacement for the icon of Christ with an inscription that provides a good clue to the early shape of the debate.

5.4.4 Leo’s Rationale

The Quinisext Council introduced the icon into the Christological debates with Canon 82. Christ was no longer to be portrayed as a symbol (i.e. as a lamb). Instead, in order to uphold the full implications of the incarnation, i.e. that Christ was not just divine but fully human too, he must be portrayed as a man. Emperor Leo III now too joined the debate. The inscription with the cross over the Chalke gate can be seen as a response to Canon 82.

5.4.4.1 Chalke Gate Inscription

According to Emperor Leo III’s inscription, on the other hand, Christ cannot be materially portrayed. The inscription on the cross stated: “The Lord not suffering Christ to be portrayed in voiceless form devoid of breath, by means of earthly matter which the scriptures reject.”\(^\text{15}\) The rationale for Leo’s rejection of images of Christ was nothing new. As discussed earlier, the most common criticism of Christian art from the earliest days of the Church related to an Old Testament ban. The Second Commandment in Exodus 20:4 – 5 reads: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness

\(^\text{15}\) Cited in Moorhead, “Byzantine Iconoclasm,” 15.
of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them.”

The conclusion is thus drawn that the making and venerating of any image made by human hands, including that of Christ, was prohibited by Scripture and thus idolatrous. This argument promulgated by Leo in Constantinople, however, was not restricted to the inscription under the cross. In fact, around this same time Leo communicated his developing iconoclastic views to Pope Gregory II (715 – 731 CE).

5.4.4.2 Correspondence with Pope Gregory II

According to Theophanes, in 725 CE Leo “started making pronouncements about the removal of the holy and venerable icons.” When word of Leo’s developing iconoclastic attitudes reached Pope Gregory II, the pope responded by withholding the taxes of Italy and Rome and “wrote to Leo a letter of doctrinal nature, that the King ought not to talk on matters of faith and innovate on the doctrines of the Church.”

Probably responding to Leo’s annual brief on church issues, Gregory penned two letters to Leo “On the Holy Icons.” While their authenticity has been questioned, their content nevertheless demonstrates the way Leo was thinking about icons and the rationale behind his turn against them. Gregory opens his first letter by acknowledging Leo’s orthodoxy during his previous ten years and then proceeds to quote Leo so that he can refute him (a common practice that would be used again at the Seventh Ecumenical

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16 RSV.

17 Theophanes, Chronicle, 558.


19 Mansi, 12:959D – 971B and 975/d – 979D.

20 See Herrin, Formation of Christendom, 336, n. 87 for source of debate.
According to Gregory, Leo claimed that icons were idols and that anyone who venerated icons was an idolater. By appealing to Exodus 20:4 – 5, Leo argued that anything made with hands, any likeness in the sky or on earth, should not be venerated; he even threatened to send an army to Rome to destroy the icon of Peter and to arrest Gregory!

The important points to notice about Leo’s argument, however, are their simplicity and their similarity to the Chalke gate inscription. Leo was a military man, not a theologian as his son would prove to be, and his argument was nothing new. In fact, he was merely articulating the “undercurrent of potential iconoclasm” that had already hounded the church for the previous seven hundred years. Leo, however, was not the only person to be promulgating this line of argument in the Byzantine Empire.

5.5 Correspondence of Patriarch Germanus: Iconoclasm Outside Constantinople

The correspondence of Patriarch Germanus demonstrates that iconoclasm was definitely developing into a movement by the 720’s. In fact, Leo’s arguments were simultaneously being used outside of the capital as iconoclastic momentum was beginning to increase. This early spread of iconoclastic sentiment is best demonstrated by a series of letters penned by Patriarch Germanus. The Bishop Constantine of Nacoleia in the diocese of Synnada (north of Pisidian Antioch) had been concerned that icons were idolatrous and, as a result, he began to preach sermons and advise Leo against them. His overseer, Metropolitan John of Synnada, rebuked him and asked Patriarch Germanus if a local synod needed to be called to discipline him. After a discussion with Constantine, however, Patriarch Germanus decided no further action was needed. Nevertheless,
Constantine continued his iconoclastic rhetoric and Patriarch Germanus was forced to write a letter of rebuke that suspended him from his office as bishop around 723/4 CE.\textsuperscript{21}

Constantine’s argument followed the exact same contours of Leo as described by Gregory and the Chalke-gate inscription. Like Leo III, Constantine interpreted the Second Commandment as a prohibition from making or venerating any image made by human hands. This time, however, Germanus rose to the occasion and penned a defense against the iconoclastic attack.

\textit{5.5.1 Intent of Icon Veneration}

In a letter to Bishop Thomas of Claudiopolis, Germanus provides a response to this argument. According to Germanus, “One ought to look not only at what is done, but also at the intention.”\textsuperscript{22} In another place, Germanus makes this point more clearly: “When we look on an icon of a saint – and this is true for every icon of a saint – we venerate not the panel or the paint but the pious and visible figure.”\textsuperscript{23} Germanus seems to be echoing a defense for the veneration of images written a century earlier by Leontius of Neapolis who argued that when he venerated an icon of God, he did not venerate “the wood or the colors as such; rather, because it contains the inanimate expression of Christ,” he asserted that he was venerating Christ himself.\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, Leontius argued that if he had been venerating the material wood, he would never have burned the icon in a fire after the image wore off.\textsuperscript{25} The primary purpose of venerating icons for Leontius and

\textsuperscript{21} See PG 98: 161B.


\textsuperscript{23} Trans. by Edmund Jephcott in Belting, \textit{Likeness and Presence}, 503.


\textsuperscript{25} Mansi 13:44D, ibid.
Germanus, then, was first and foremost to honor and praise God, not to honor the material upon which the image was portrayed. However, this was not the only purpose that icons served.

### 5.5.2 Icons as Reminders and Defenders of Incarnation

Just as Canon 82 of the Quinisext Council had already affirmed the portrayal of Christ, thereby establishing the relationship between icons and the incarnation, Germanus’ defense of icons simply followed this canon’s lead. In fact, Germanus presents an argument that sounds almost identical to Canon 82 in a work *On Heresies and Synods*:

In eternal memory of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, of His passion, of His saving death, and the salvation of the world that they bring about, we have received the tradition of portraying Him in His human form, in His visible theophany, understanding that in this way we exalt the humiliation of God the Word.

Hence, for Germanus, the incarnation had changed everything and the “humiliation of God” could actually be exalted by depicting the “visible theophany” of Christ.

Exalting the incarnation, however, was not the only implication of the icon for Germanus. In a letter to Metropolitan John of Synnada, Germanus further articulated his defense for icons by exploring its Christological ramifications. The icon, Germanus argued, is integrally related to the incarnation. First, the icon is a reminder of the wonders wrought by the incarnation, namely man’s salvation: “In conformity with this firm belief, we depict the likeness of his holy flesh in our icons, which we esteem and

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26 As previously mentioned, it has been suggested that Germanus took part in the Council of Trullo. This would certainly explain the similarities in the argument; the similarities, however, by no means prove his participation.

honor through appropriate reverence, for they remind us of his life-giving and ineffable incarnation." And second, the icon holds up the doctrine of the incarnation: "For we have that urge to depict what pertains to our Faith, namely, the truth that Christ became man not merely in appearance and impression . . . but in reality and truth, and complete in everything except sin, which the enemy has planted in us." Thus, according to Germanus, by depicting Christ in an icon one not only exalts Christ and is reminded of the salvation that has been offered through the humanity of Christ, but the very reality of the incarnation of Christ is defended as well.

5.5.3 Icons Depict Humanity of Christ, Not Divinity

Germanus’ emphasis upon the depiction of the human aspect of Christ, it should be noted, was not accidental. As one of the instigators of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, Germanus was well aware of the complexities of the Christological controversies. Consequently, he certainly would have taken the contours of that controversy into consideration as he pondered the role of icons. Indeed, Germanus was careful to balance his affirmation of depicting the humanity of Christ with the prohibition of any attempt to depict the divinity of Christ:

We allow icons to be fashioned and painted with wax and colors, not in order to pervert the perfection of our liturgy. Of the invisible deity we make neither likeness nor any other form. For even the supreme choirs of the holy angels do not fully know or fathom God. But then the only-begotten Son, who dwells in the bosom of the Father, desiring to free his own creature from the sentence of death, mercifully deigned, according to the Father’s and the Holy Spirit’s counsel, to become man. He took on our own flesh and blood, one like us yet without sin, as the great Apostle says. For this reason we depict his human likeness in an image, the way he looked as man and in the flesh, and not as he is in his ineffable and invisible divinity.


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

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Germanus would have no part in trying to circumscribe the uncircumscribable God. The incarnation had opened the door for depicting the God who became Man, not the depiction of the invisible and incomprehensible God.

Germanus thus proved to be pivotal in the debate over icons. Not only did he echo the initial Christological foundation of the icon articulated by Canon 82 of the Quinisext Council, but he also emphasized the importance of depicting the humanity of Christ and avoiding the attempt to portray the divinity of Christ. As a result, Germanus laid the groundwork for both Monk John Damascene and Emperor Constantine V to build upon in the next stage of the debate. Consequently, however, as a pivotal defender of icons at a critical point in the debate, his stance would cost him his job as patriarch.

5.6 Resignation of Germanus

On January 17, 730 CE, Emperor Leo III convened a silentium, a solemn gathering to make the first official decree against icons. Convinced that he would be able to persuade Germanus to sign the treaty – maybe he knew of Germanus wavering under Philippicus – he invited Germanus to the meeting. Although in an awkward position yet again, this time Germanus was far more wise and ready to handle such a dilemma. Thus, he did not hesitate to refuse his signature. According to Theophanes the Confessor,

after expounding the true doctrine, he resigned from the episcopacy and surrendered his pallium. Following many words of instruction he said, “If I am Jonah, cast me into the sea. For without an ecumenical council it is impossible for me, O emperor, to innovate in matters of faith.”

After fourteen years as patriarch of Constantinople, controversy had once again caught up with Germanus and forced him to retire to his family estate at Platanion where he died three years later (d. 733 CE).

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31 Theophanes, Chronicle, 565.
Germanus lived a long and active life that was oftentimes caught up into a whirlwind of controversy. From his father’s assassination and his resulting castration to his role in the Monothelite controversy and the Sixth Ecumenical Council, from his wavering under Emperor Philippicus to his renewed orthodoxy and elevation to the patriarchate of Constantinople under Emperor Anastasius II, from his dealings with iconoclast bishops and archbishops in Asia Minor to his relationship with Emperor Leo III, Germanus was truly, in the words of Theophanes the Confessor, a “holy and admirable man . . . prominent in defending pious doctrine in Byzantium.”32 Indeed, Patriarch Germanus played a prominent role in defending Byzantine theology and, as a result, he paved the way for the Monk John Damascene to develop a theology of icons.

32 Theophanes, 564.
CHAPTER SIX

MONK JOHN DAMASCENE & EMPEROR CONSTANTINE V: COMPETING THEOLOGIES EMERGE

To Mansur, the one with a vile-sounding name and of Saracen opinion, anathema! To the worshipper of icons and writer of falsehoods, Mansur, anathema! To the insulter of Christ and conspirator against the Empire, Mansur, anathema! To the teacher of impiety and misinterpreter of the Holy Scriptures Mansur, anathema!

Council of Hiereia (754 CE)

Everlasting remembrance for John, the orthodox believer.

Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 CE)

What shall we call you, holy John? By your theology, you merit the title of the beloved apostle. . . . All the ends of the earth are enlightened by your eloquence, sweeter than honey.

December 4 Vespers Service

6.1 Monk John Damascene

Around 706 CE, Mansur St John Damascene left his post as fiscal administrator of the Muslim caliphate in Damascus – a position his father and grandfather had also held – and fled to the Judean desert to take up monastic vows at the Great Laura, a Palestinian monastery founded by St. Sabas.¹ Within twenty years of this flight, the Byzantine Emperor Leo III initiated his imperial policy of iconoclasm. As a humble but brilliant monk dwelling outside the Byzantine Empire, and thus protected from the possible wrath

of the emperor, John was in a particularly good position to respond to this new iconoclastic policy.

Certainly aware of Canon 82 of the Quinisext Council, and possibly familiar with the arguments of Patriarch Germanus, John was thoroughly convinced that the Christian doctrine of the incarnation was at stake in the developing controversy over icons. Confident that the controversy was more than a mere local disturbance, the Damascene monk was compelled to follow in the footsteps of St. John the Baptist. As a voice crying out from the Judean wilderness (literally!), John penned one of the most articulate and long-lasting refutations of iconoclasm. Indeed, Patristic scholar Andrew Louth notes that the very fact that the iconoclastic Council of Hiereia (754) gave four lines of anathema to St John Damascene, in contrast to the single line given to both Germanus and George, demonstrates the effectiveness of John’s arguments. Before turning to his arguments, however, it is essential to situate him within the Palestinian monasticism to which he fled.

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2 Palestinian monks, as will be discussed, were some of the strongest defenders of the Ecumenical Councils and John surely would have been aware of the Council of Trullo. Indeed, his main argument echoes Canon 82. John mentions the edict of Leo III in Oration I.66 and the exile of Germanus in Oration II.12 (both written sometime around 730 CE). Although there is no evidence, it is conceivable that he may have had some communication with the patriarch Germanus – Could Germanus have asked John to pen a defense?


4 Louth, St. John Damascene, 197.

5 The following section on Palestinian monasticism is heavily indebted to and guided by Louth, St. John Damascene, 9 – 12.
6.1.1 Palestinian Monasticism

The first monasteries began to spring up at the end of the third and beginning of the fourth centuries in various parts of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. While these monastic beginnings had humble origins, by the beginning of the fifth century, according to historian John Binns, monasticism had “developed . . . into a mass movement in which a huge quantity of both human and financial resources flowed into the desert monastic communities.”

Following the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century, and particularly after his mother Helena claimed to have discovered the true cross and the places of Christ’s crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, Palestine inevitably developed into a center of pilgrimage for Christians. Consequently, during a time of decline elsewhere in the empire, Palestine became a bustling place of prosperity. This change of fortune would affect the monasteries of the surrounding area as well. Indeed, many Palestinian monasteries earned great fame and wealth by their association with the holy sites of Jerusalem (e.g. financial gifts for building projects). More importantly, however, Louth notes that the interaction between Palestinian monasteries and pilgrims, between

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6 Cyril of Scythopolis, *The Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, with intro. and notes by John Binns, trans. R.M. Price (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), ix; Binns also notes that the “almost simultaneous and apparently unconnected manner in which the first monasteries developed has caused the old view that monasticism began in Egypt and spread northward to be abandoned. A variety of religious, social, and economic reasons for the origin of monastic life has been advanced” (x).

7 Ibid., x.

Palestinian monks and the Byzantine Emperor, “also meant that they were aware of a wider Christian world beyond their immediate Palestinian context.”

6.1.1.1 Hearth of Chalcedonianism

The consequences of this awareness would be pivotal for the Palestinian monks in the coming centuries as the Church became embroiled in Christological controversy. While the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) defined Christ as one person with two natures (divine and human), many Syrian and Egyptian Christians (Jacobians and Theodosians respectively) refused to accept this definition. To them, it seemed to undermine the unity of Christ that had been affirmed by St. Cyril of Alexandria at the Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus (431 CE). The Palestinian monks, on the other hand, though just as committed to Cyril and the Council of Ephesus, fully supported the Chalcedonian definition.

Palestinian monastic support for Chalcedonianism was so vigorous, in fact, that it “almost alone in the East came to assume the role of guardians of Orthodoxy.” Indeed, thousands of monks from the Judean wilderness followed St. Sabas (the founder of the Great Laura, St John Damascene’s monastery) to resist an anti-Chalcedonian movement that began in 516 CE under emperor Anastasios (491 – 518 CE). Furthermore, the Palestinian monks led the resistance to the seventh-century imperial supported movements of Monenergism (Christ has a single divine-human [theandric] activity), led by St. Sophronius, and Monothelitism (Christ has a single divine will), led by St. Sophronius’ disciple St. Maximus the Confessor. As a result, Palestinian monasticism

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9 Louth, St. John Damascene, 9.

10 Ibid.
and Chalcedonian Orthodoxy became practically synonymous, so much so that, according to Bernard Flusin, it became “the very hearth of Chalcedonianism.”

6.1.2 Arabs Create Theologically Level Playing Field

In the mean time, while these seventh-century Christological controversies (Monenergism and Monothelitism) were being debated, an even more significant turn of events took place. In 638 CE, the same year that Monothelitism was imperially promulgated under Emperor Heraclius (610 – 641 CE), St. Sophronius (elected patriarch of Jerusalem in 634 CE), surrendered the city of Jerusalem to the Arab Caliph Umar. This momentous occasion drastically and permanently changed the Palestinian landscape. Louth effectively summarizes the new scenario, arguing that:

there was created, under the caliphate, a kind of level playing field so far as religious doctrine was concerned. . . . so that Christians of all varieties – those who accepted synodical Orthodoxy; those who rejected Chalcedon out of loyalty to St Cyril of Alexandria (often called ‘Monophysites’); those who had been condemned at the Synod of Ephesus at which Cyril had been victorious, called by their enemies ‘Nestorians’ after the patriarch of Constantinople deposed at that council; Monenergists; and Monothelites – now existed alongside one another, and also alongside those belonging to other religions, not least Jews . . . and probably also Samaritans and Manichees.  

This newly created “level playing field” created new possibilities for the Palestinian monks. They were now able to move beyond merely defending the faith of the Ecumenical Councils and could spend their time “refining and defining” that faith. This was precisely the atmosphere into which the Palestinian Monk John the Damascene

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12 Louth, St John Damascene, 11 – 12.
entered when he arrived at the Great Laura. Indeed, it would shape his entire theological ouvre.

6.1.3 An Original Thinker?

The Damascene monk had no desire to be theologically creative. Standing at the end of eight centuries and six ecumenical councils worth of theological reflection and tradition, John’s primary desire was to preserve and synthesize the Christian faith. Indeed, at the beginning of his magnum opus, The Fountainhead of Knowledge, John insists, “I shall say nothing of my own, but I shall set down things that have been said in various places by wise and godly men.”13 Consequently, throughout this work and his other writings, including his three treatises on icons, he constantly appeals to patristic authorities, sometimes copying out entire passages word for word.14

Thus, John’s work does not seem to be original in the way modern scholars usually understand originality. However, according to the definition of originality given by the Greek critic Zissimos Lorenzatos, it could be considered original in the truest sense of the word. Lorenzatos argues that originality, more than anything, “means to remain faithful to the originals,” an endeavor that the Palestinian monks, and St John

13 St John of Damascus, Writings, tr. Frederic H. Chase, Jr (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958). The Fountainhead of Knowledge contains three parts: 1) Philosophical Chapters; 2) On Heresies; and 3) The Orthodox Faith. The third part, The Orthodoxy Faith, is the first systematic presentation of the faith and theology of the Christian Church. It became a model for medieval theologians like Peter Lombard who followed John’s example in his great work, The Sentences, by dividing it into four books: Book 1 on God in unity and trinity; Book 2 on God’s creation, especially man; Book 3 on Christology; and Book 4 on sacraments and eschatology. St. Thomas Aquinas would utilize both of these works as he wrote his Summa.

14 John also includes a florilegium at the end of each of his three treatises in defense of icons. A very popular literary tradition by John’s day, the florilegium (Lat. flos, “a flower”; and lego, “I gather”) was a collection of passages gathered together to establish the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of a given theologian or theological position.
Damascene especially, pursued with all the energy and passion they could possibly muster.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, as Louth suggests, “John’s theological achievement is but the culmination of the reflection and argument and celebration that took place in Palestine in the century following the Arab conquest.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{6.1.4 Iconophile Theology Emerges}

Historian Moshe Barasch notes in his study on the icon that although there had already been debate over images prior to John – “on their power and on the dangers inherent in them” – John’s three treatises\textsuperscript{17} in defense of icons were “the first attempt made by a Christian theologian to formulate a coherent theory of images.”\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, John may have been the first Christian thinker to explicitly ask simple, naïve questions, such as what is an image, are there different types of images, and what are they? As a result, Barasch correctly concludes that “John’s Orations form the first Christian treatise devoted explicitly and exclusively to sacred images.”\textsuperscript{19}

John’s first apology for icons was an immediate response to the news of Leo’s new iconoclastic policy. Some readers, however, found this first defense difficult to understand and at their request John wrote a second treatise several years later to simplify

\textsuperscript{15} Zissimos Lorenzatos, \textit{The Drama of Quality}, Romiosyni Series, 16 (Evia, Greece: Denise Harvey, 2000), 15. Quoted in Louth, \textit{St. John Damascene}, viii.


\textsuperscript{17} The first treatise was probably written between 726 and 730 AD, the second sometime after 730 AD, and the third in the 740’s AD.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
his argument.\textsuperscript{20} The third treatise, written near the end of his life, appears to be an expanded and more systematic version of the second. Thus, as Louth notes, “what we have in these treatises is not really three treatises, but three versions of the same defence of the veneration of icons against Byzantine iconoclasm.”\textsuperscript{21} The heart of the Damascene’s defense, however, lies in the first treatise (though it does not contain all of the arguments). Therefore, it is to this treatise that attention shall be directed, particularly to the role of unwritten tradition, the importance of understanding the difference between icons and idolatry and between worship and veneration, to the nature and purpose of images, and last, but most fundamental for John, the vital relationship between icons and the incarnation.

\textit{6.1.4.1 Unwritten Tradition}

John’s most pressing goal throughout his defense of icons – indeed, throughout his whole life and literary career – was to remain faithful to the Christian tradition, both written and unwritten. John would have readily admitted that the Scriptures did not contain a commandment for Christians to possess and venerate icons. Instead, however, he appealed to St Paul and St Basil who both argued that the teaching of the Church had been handed down both in written and unwritten traditions. While St Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to hold to the traditions they had been taught, “either by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thess. 2:15), St Basil claimed that both the written and unwritten traditions had “the same force for piety.”\textsuperscript{22} As a result, according to St Basil, “if we try to dismiss

\textsuperscript{20} St John, \textit{Three Treatises}, II.1, 60: “Some of the children of the Church have enjoined me to do this because the first was not completely clear to everyone.”

\textsuperscript{21} Louth, \textit{St John Damascene}, 200.

\textsuperscript{22} St John, \textit{Three Treatises}, I.23, 37.
that which is unwritten among the customs as of no great authority, then without noticing it we shall damage the Gospel.”

At the opening of his first defense of icons, John picks up Basil’s argument and applies it to the iconoclastic controversy. What a calamity it would be, he ponders, for the Church, “adorned with such privileges and arrayed with traditions received from above” to bear

a disfiguring mark in the midst of a face exceeding fair, thus harming the whole by the slightest injury to its beauty. For what is small is not small, if it produces something big, so the slightest disturbance of the tradition of the Church that has held sway from the beginning is no small matter.

John believed that the implications of disturbing the tradition of the Church were immense. Thus, thoroughly convinced that icons were just as fully a part of unwritten tradition as other common practices (e.g. venerating the place of Christ’s crucifixion and burial, threefold immersion baptism, prayer facing East, and the sacraments), John was compelled to defend them, for in his mind, the very purity of the Gospel was at stake. Before examining how John viewed the relationship between icons and the Gospel, however, a couple of very basic ideas should be clarified.

6.1.4.2 Icons & Idolatry

While it is a common assumption that the association of icons and idolatry dates back to the Protestant Reformation, this argument actually dates back to the first days of the Christian Church. However, the argument especially came to the fore during the first period of the iconoclastic controversy, beginning with Emperor Leo III. The attack

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23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., I.2, 20.
25 John borrows these examples from the passage he quotes from St Basil, On the Holy Spirit, which means these practices date to the fourth century at the latest.
against icons during this first phase primarily hinged upon the Old Testament prohibition of idolatry. Indeed, Leo III saw the chaotic condition of the empire and concluded that it could only be explained by God’s displeasure with the empire’s idolatry of icons. He thus took it upon himself to appease the wrath of God by cleansing the Christian Churches of icons just as Hezekiah had once cleansed the Temple of idols. It would be very naïve, however, to think that the iconophiles were unaware of this Old Testament prohibition of idolatry.

As a matter of fact, John opens his argument with an acknowledged familiarity with these prohibitions by citing a number of Old Testament commandments: “the Lord our God is one Lord” (Deut. 6:4); “you shall venerate (fear) the Lord your God and him alone shall you worship” (Deut. 6:13); “there shall be for you no other gods” (Deut. 5:7); “you shall not make any carved likeness, of anything in heaven above or on the earth below” (Deut. 5:8); “all who venerate (worship) carved [images] shall be put to shame” (Ps. 97:7); “gods, who did not make heaven and earth, shall be destroyed” (Jer. 10:11).26 Having thus beaten his opponents to the punch by citing the very sources they relied upon in their accusations, John proceeds to turn the iconoclasts’ argument on its head.

John insists that the iconoclasts, while appealing to these very same passages, completely missed the spirit hidden beneath the letter of the law. The result? They completely failed to interpret Scripture correctly.27 According to John, the same Moses who gave these commandments interpreted them himself in Deut. 4:19: “Beware lest you look up in the sky and see the sun and the moon and the stars and all the order of heaven, and being led astray venerate them and worship them.” Therefore, John concludes, “the

26 The biblical passages that follow, unless otherwise indicated, are from trans. by Louth in St. John, *Three Treatises*, III.6, 85 – 86.
single purpose of this is that one should not worship, or offer the veneration of worship, to creation instead of the Creator, but only to the One who fashioned all.”

6.1.4.3 Clarification of Terms: “Latreia” vs “Proskynesis”

John continues his defense by shifting his attention to terminology. By making an important etymological distinction, John provides a key to the debunking of the iconoclasts’ accusation against the veneration of icons. According to John, there are two types of veneration: first, the veneration of worship and total devotion that is due to God alone, typically expressed by the Greek word *latreia* (the classical sense of this word indicated a service of the gods); and second, a veneration that is a sign of respect and honor for people or places, typically expressed by the Greek word *proskynesis* (this word denotes the action of bowing or prostration – as to the emperor). A failure to understand the fundamental difference between these two terms, according to John, is devastating to a proper understanding of the role of icons.

6.1.4.3.1 Biblical Veneration of People and Places

John goes on to illustrate the Biblical use of the word *proskynesis* (veneration). Indeed, using the same Old Testament Scriptures that prohibit idolatry, John begins with passages that present the veneration of people. For example, after Sarah’s death Abraham venerated (bowed before) the Hittites in his negotiations for a tomb (Gen. 23:7,12). Likewise, when Joshua encountered the commander of the army of the Lord, he “fell on his face to the earth, and venerated” (Joshua 5:14). Jacob too venerated his brother Esau seven times (“bowed himself to the ground”) upon meeting him after their

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28 Ibid., I.6, 23.
long separation, as did Jacob’s maids and their children, Leah and her children, and
Joseph and Rachel (Gen. 33:3,6-7). There is also, according to John, a veneration of
rulers ordained by God, demonstrated by Joseph’s younger brothers who venerated him
each time they came before him in Egypt in their search for grain during the great famine:
they “bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground” (Gen. 42:6, 43:26,
44:14). Moreover, John cites examples of venerating places. The Psalmist says: “Let us
venerate in the place where his feet stood” (Ps. 132:7). Additionally, there is a veneration
of sacred places: Israel venerated the tabernacle and temple in Jerusalem as they bowed
towards it – something John claims to have witnessed himself.

According to John, in all of these Biblical examples, those venerating were simply
demonstrating honor and respect, not worship. Indeed, John notes that the “veneration of
worship is one thing, veneration offered in honor to those who excel on account of
something worthy is another.” Hence, John concludes that the iconoclasts should
therefore either “reject all veneration or accept all these forms with its proper reason and
manner.” With the misconceived association between icons and idols dispelled by
distinguishing the veneration of worship to God alone and the veneration of honor to
people, places, and things, John turns to yet another clarification by exploring the
meaning of the word “image.”

6.1.4.4 The Image: Definition and Purpose

29 Ibid., I.8, 25.
30 Ibid., I.14, 28.
31 Appealing to Basil’s and Athanasius’ famous comparison of the honor given to the
image of an emperor on a coin proceeding to the emperor instead of the coin, this
argument will also be applied to icons: the honor given to the depicted image is in fact
being given to the person depicted.
Excellent logician that he is, John begins by defining the term he intends to explore and stating its purpose.\(^{32}\) “An image,” according to John, “is a likeness depicting an archetype, but having some difference from it; the image is not like the archetype in every way.”\(^ {33}\) He expands upon this definition in his third treatise by stating that

An image is therefore a likeness and pattern and impression of something, showing in itself what is depicted; however, the image is certainly not the archetype, that is, what is depicted, in every respect – for the image is one thing and what it depicts is another – and certainly a difference is seen between them, since they are not identical.\(^{34}\)

To illustrate his definition of an image, he notes that a son is an image of his father and yet different from him – he is the son, not the father. In addition to defining the term, he describes the purpose of an image: “Every image makes manifest and demonstrates something hidden. . . . the image was devised to guide us to knowledge and to make manifest and open what is hidden…we learn what is hidden from things recorded and noised abroad.”\(^ {35}\) With the definition and purpose of images thus articulated, John goes on to enumerate the various types of images, six in all (the sixth is added in the third treatise).

6.1.4.5 *Six Types of Images*

First, he asserts that there is a natural image found even within the Godhead itself:

“The Son is a living, natural and undeviating image of the Father, bearing in himself the whole Father, equal to him in every respect, differing only in being caused. For the

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\(^{32}\) The first part of St John’s *Fountainhead of Knowledge* is a Christian handbook of logic called the *Dialectica* or the *Philosophical Chapters*.


\(^{34}\) Ibid., III.16, 95.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., III.17, 96.
Father is the natural cause, and the Son is caused; for the Father is not from the Son, but the Son from the Father. For [the Son] is from him, that is the Father who begets him, without his being after him.”

Second, he notes that there are images in God of things to come, “paradigms of what he is going to bring about, that is his will that is before eternity and thus eternal.” From before time, God had an image or paradigm in his will or mind of all that would happen and come to be. Pseudo – Dionysius calls these images predeterminations and John illustrates by pointing out that if one decides to build a house, before beginning construction, the form of the house must first be formulated and depicted in the mind. As Louth has noted in a recent lecture, what John has done is Christianize the Platonic doctrine of the forms, which have a timeless reflection in the world. For St. John, these forms now take on time and receive a tense. The form or image is in God’s mind and is intended to be worked out in the future within time. Hence, there is progression in the history of the world that is leading somewhere, a place already formulated in the mind of God before there was time. The image is thus in God, outside of time, but worked out on earth and in the cosmos within time.

37 Ibid., I.10, 25 and III.19, 97.
38 Pseudo – Dionysius, The Divine Names in The Complete Works, tr. Colm Luibheid (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), 5.8, 102: “The exemplars of everything preexist as a transcendent unity within It. It brings forth being as a tide of being. We give the name of ‘examplar’ to those principles which preexist as a unity in God and which produce the essences of things. Theology calls them predefining, divine and good acts of will which determine and create things and in accordance with which the Transcendent One predefinéd and brought into being everything that is.”
Third, the Damascene adds that “there are images of invisible and formless things, that provide in bodily form a dim understanding of what is depicted.”

Again, according to Pseudo – Dionysius, humans have been given “forms for formless things and shapes for shapeless things...because our analogies are not capable of raising us immediately to intellectual contemplation but need familiar and natural points of reference.”

Hence, due to their inability to fully grasp reality or God, they have been given images, analogies, pictures, and metaphors to help them in their weakness. John concludes this third thought by citing St. Gregory of Nazianzen, who argued that “the intellect, tiring of trying to get past all things corporeal, realizes its impotence.”

An attempt to understand the spiritual world or any spiritual realities without making use of the material world and images derived from it is futile and will simply be a disappointment. This is why Scripture constantly makes use of images, providing the steps needed to ascend in knowledge and understanding of the spiritual world. John sums his point up with an adept illustration: “For we see images in created things intimating to us dimly reflections of the divine; as when we say that there is an image of the holy Trinity, which is beyond any beginning, in the sun, its light and its ray.”

Fourth, John points to images of the future, which describe things to come “in shadowy enigmas.”

The ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:10 – 16), Aaron’s rod (Num. 17:8),

40 St John, Three Treatises, I.11, 26 and III.21, 98 - 99.
41 Ibid., I.11, 26
42 Ibid., I.11, 26.
44 Ibid., I.12, 27; see also III.22, 99.
and the jar of manna (Ex. 16:33) are all examples mentioned by John as foreshadowing the incarnation by means of the Virgin Mary. The bronze serpent erected by Moses points to the cross and the defeat of sin. According to Paul, the sea, water and the cloud all point to the Spirit of baptism (Num. 21:8, John 3:14 and 1 Cor. 10: 1 - 2). Although John only lists these few examples, the Old Testament is full of typological images that foreshadow the recorded events in the New Testament.45

Fifth, there are images of the past such as miracles or virtuous deeds that can be recalled and used to inspire one to “flee what is evil and be zealous for what is good.”46 These images can be written down with words in books or through visible objects such as the jar of manna and Aaron’s rod, which were placed in the Ark of the Covenant as a memorial.

Finally, the sixth image, only mentioned in the third treatise, is “brought about by God through imitation, that is human kind.” Thus, humans are created in the image of God and this is demonstrated by the way the human person mind, reason, and spirit) is modeled after the Trinity: the human mind or intellect corresponds to God the Father; human reason corresponds to the Divine Logos, God the Son; and the human spirit corresponds to the Holy Spirit. Moreover, humans are like God in that they are self-determined and rule over creation.


46 St John, Three Treatises, I.13, 27; see also III.23, 99 - 100.
**6.1.4.6 Icons Integral to Christianity**

Now the important question is why such a focus upon the various types of images? What is John trying to say? He is making an essential point in understanding the theology of the icon. Everything is characterized by images, including both the created world and the uncreated Godhead. Louth sums the point up well: “Reality echoes reality” and “images establish relationships between realities. . . . The image, in its different forms, is always mediating, always holding together in harmony. Images in the form of pictorial icons fit into this pattern, in a quite humble way. But to deny the icon is to threaten the whole fabric of harmony and mediation based on the image.”

Thus, at the end of describing the various types of images, echoing his conclusion to his discussion on the two types of veneration, St. John asserts that we should “either destroy every image and establish laws against the One who ordered that these things should be, or receive each in the reason and manner fitting to each.” We must either accept the fact that images are built into the very structure of our world and help us understand reality or we should reject them. Though icons may be the last and lowest type of image, to reject them, in John’s mind, is to reject the way God has made the world. To reject and destroy icons, or even doubt their significance, is a direct attack upon the Christian faith that will inevitably result in the unraveling of the very fabric of Christian theology. Indeed, the fundamental Gospel doctrine of Christianity, the incarnation, would lose its significance.

**6.1.4.7 Icon & Incarnation**

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47 Louth, *St John Damascene*, 216.
Echoing the language of Canon 82 of the Quinisext Council and of Patriarch Germanus, John intimately connects the icon to the incarnation in the following meditation:

For it is clear that when you see the bodiless become human for your sake, then you may accomplish the figure of a human form; when the invisible becomes visible in the flesh, then you may depict the likeness of something seen; when one who, by transcending his own nature, is bodiless, formless, incommensurable, without magnitude or size, that is, one who is in the form of God, taking the form of a slave, by this reduction to quantity and magnitude puts on the characteristics of a body, then depict him on a board and set up to view the One who has accepted to be seen.

Hence, because God has deigned to make himself visible, it is now possible to “depict the invisible God, not as invisible, but as he became visible for our sake, by participation in flesh and blood.”

By thus emphasizing the way the invisible allowed himself to be depicted, the unimaginable to be portrayed, the immeasurable to be drawn, the formless to be made, and the bodiless to be colored, John took the idea of the incarnation and applied it to every conceivable aspect of the material world.

Indeed, in stark contrast to Gnostic heresies such as Docetism and Manichaeism, which had persistently plagued the Church since the second century with their negative view of matter, John emphasized the positive power of the incarnation, a power that even opened the way for sanctifying matter, thereby making it worthy of veneration.

John continues his argument:

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49 Ibid., I.8, 24; John continues by specifying what exactly should be depicted: “Depict his ineffable descent, his birth from the Virgin, his being baptized in the Jordan, his transfiguration on Tabor, what he endured to secure our freedom from passion, the miracles, symbols of his divine nature, performed by the divine activity through the activity of the flesh, the saving cross, the tomb, the resurrection, the ascent into heaven. Depict all these in words and in colors.”

50 Ibid., I.4, 22.

I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked. . . . Therefore I reverence the rest of matter and hold in respect that through which my salvation came, because it is filled with divine energy and grace. Is not the thrice-precious and thrice-blessed wood of the cross matter? Is not the holy and august mountain, the place of the skull, matter? Is not the life-giving and life-bearing rock, the holy tomb, the source of the resurrection, matter? Is not the all-holy book of the Gospels matter? Is not the life-bearing table, which offers us the bread of life, matter? Is not the gold and silver matter, out of which crosses and tablets and bowls are fashioned? And, before all these things, is not the body and blood of my Lord matter?52

Consequently, John concludes, one should either reject the veneration of these objects or embrace the tradition of the Church and allow the veneration of images to continue.

In the process of emphasizing the intimate connection between the icon and the incarnation, as well as the venerable nature of sanctified matter, John made an important distinction that would be brought up by the iconoclasts in less than twenty years: the incomprehensibility and uncircumscribability of God. Like the Patriarch Germanus, John expressly articulated the impossibility of depicting the invisible divinity while simultaneously affirming the possibility of portraying the visible incarnate God: “I do not depict the invisibly divinity, but I depict God made visible in the flesh.”53 This statement, precisely, articulated the theological crux of the issue. Unfortunately, it would create endless debate and horrific violence over the next fifty years. Indeed, nearly a

gnosticism “manifests itself in the veneration of secret spiritual knowledge, the elevation of spiritual elites in possession of such knowledge, a denigration of time and history, a tendency to view the physical realm as evil and a corresponding tendency to view human embodiment with suspicion...In its most elemental form, gnosticism is the systematic spiritual effort to escape the confines of history and physical embodiment through secret knowledge (gnosis) and technique (magic).” For early Christian responses to gnosticism, see Irenaeus, Against Heresies, and Michael W. Holmes, The Apostolic Fathers (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), particularly Ignatius.


53 Ibid.
decade before Emperor Leo III issued his iconoclast decree, he and his wife bore a son who would eventually respond to St. John’s arguments by creating the first iconoclast theology, disseminating it through a church council, and initiating a policy of persecution toward iconophiles.

6.2 Emperor Constantine V: A Foreboding Baptism

Although Emperor Leo III officially initiated iconoclasm with his edict in 730 CE, his son would carry the cause even further. Indeed, Patriarch Germanus interpreted the baptism of the newborn son of Leo III and his wife Maria as a foreboding sign of things to come. According to Theophanes the Confessor, while Germanus was baptizing Constantine, Leo III’s son and successor, “a terrible and evil-smelling sign was manifested in his very infancy, for he defecated in the holy font.”54 Germanus subsequently prophesied that great evil “would befall the Christians and the church on account of Constantine.”55

6.2.1 Persecution of Iconophiles

Constantine became far more vigorous in his application of iconoclast policy than his father had ever been. Sometime in the 750’s, probably after the Council of Hieria (754 CE), he began persecuting iconophiles. This applied especially to monks for they stubbornly remained the staunchest defenders of icons. As a result, he confiscated the properties of their monasteries, forced them to join the army, and made them break their vows of celibacy by forcing them to marry nuns. He also, however, physically persecuted them, sometimes even to the point of death.

6.2.1.1 Iconophile Martydom: St. Stephen the Younger

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54 Theophanes, Chronicle, 551 – 552.

55 Ibid.
According to a brief notice on St. Stephen the Younger in the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*, Emperor Constantine V “condemned the monks to countless tortures and exiles,” including St. Stephen the Younger. The monk Stephen had defied the emperor by clinging to his icons and was consequently arrested and imprisoned in the *Praitorion*, along with more than three hundred other monks from various parts of the empire. According to the Synaxarion account, “some of them were deprived of their noses, others of their ears and eyes, yet others of their hands and beards.”

Eleven months after his arrest, in 765 CE, Stephen received his sentence: he was thrown to the ground, his feet were bound, and he was dragged along a public road while citizens of Constantinople “threw stones at him and struck him with wooden clubs.” One citizen named Philomates, a city official (*komes*) in charge of the city walls and aqueducts, was so excited to impress the emperor with his iconoclastic fervor that he hit Stephen “on the head with a huge wooden club so that he died immediately, as his brains poured forth from his shattered skull.” Hence, the attack upon monasticism by Constantine V,

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56 A *synaxarion*, according to *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, is a “collection of brief notices, mostly hagiographical . . . The Synaxarion of Constantinople was probably formed in the 10th C. . . . These daily commemorations, which average only about a paragraph in length, stress the martyrdom of the saints and inform us where in the city the commemoration took place” (p. 1991).


58 The *Praitorion* was a building in the capital that served as a prison until the sentence was announced by the *praetor*.

59 Ibid., 11 – 12.

60 Ibid., 12.

61 Ibid.
though not a systematic persecution throughout the empire, clearly led to cruel tortures and even martyrdoms of monks. While such drastic measures taken against the primary supporters of icons may seem like an emotional over-reaction, there was far more substance to Constantine’s iconoclastic policies. Indeed, these persecutions only began after years of formulating an iconoclast theology.

6.2.2 Iconoclast Theology Emerges

While Leo III had appealed to the Old Testament commandment prohibiting graven images and idolatry as the primary source for his argument against icons, his son Constantine V expanded the iconoclast argument. Just as St. John Damascene emphasized the Christological implications of the icon and explored the nature of images, Constantine V now too turned to these same subjects. The contours of Constantine’s theological arguments against icons were developed and clarified primarily in the early 750’s through imperially organized meetings (silentia), through a series of tracts composed by Constantine himself (Enquiries), and finally, through a church council summoned by Constantine (Council of Hierieia).

6.2.2.1 Imperial Meetings Explore Icons

Sometime in the early 750’s Constantine ordered a series of silentia to study and discuss the Biblical and Patristic texts related to icons. According to Theophanes, Constantine “held audiences every day and treacherously urged the people to follow his designs.”62 Herrin points to a dialogue between an iconoclast bishop named Cosmas and an iconophile monk named George as a clue to the content of these silentia.63

62 Theophanes, Chronicle, 591. While it has been argued that these meetings were held in “every city” of the empire instead of being held “every day,” Mango and Scott argue that it should be read “every day”: see 591, n. 1.

63 Herrin, Formation of Christendom, 366.
6.2.2.1.1 “The Advice of the Old Man Concerning Holy Icons”

The second section of “The Advice of the Old Man Concerning Holy Icons” summarizes the iconoclast argument at the early stages of Constantine’s thought. First, Cosmas the iconoclast argues that those who insist on continuing to venerate icons are essentially rebelling against the emperor. Second, he repeats the standard appeal to the Second Commandment of the Old Testament by arguing that the veneration of icons is clearly prohibited and that icons are idols. Third, while George the iconophile appeals to unwritten tradition (e.g. statues of Christ erected by Constantine I and the image of Christ sent to King Abgar of Edessa), Cosmas demands scriptural evidence. And fourth, while Cosmas cites patristic evidence that supports the Biblical injunction against idolatry (e.g. Epiphanius of Salamis, George of Alexandria, and Severos of Antioch), George notes that all of these authorities were heretics.

The iconoclast argument thus relied upon traditional iconoclast ideas during these silentia. It had still not incorporated the Christological arguments into the controversy. However, Herrin suggests that these debates “air[ed] the basic issues and could act as a preparation for more sophisticated argumentation.”\(^{64}\) Indeed, she suggests that this may have in fact been the primary motivation for the meetings.

6.2.2.2 “Enquiries” of Emperor Constantine V Introduce Christology

While the imperially ordered silentia had successfully brought the issue of icons to the fore once again, Constantine himself raised the iconoclast argument up to the realm of Christology. Through a series of tracts penned by Constantine titled Enquiries – as

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 367.
many as thirteen though only two survive⁶⁵ – the iconoclast position now countered the Christological arguments that had been offered by Monk John Damascene. As Schönborn has noted, Constantine was certainly aware of the importance of Christology to the Byzantine church and he knew that the “accusation of Christological heresy was bound to awaken all the ghosts that for centuries had frightened and confused Byzantine history.”⁶⁶ Indeed, if he could only expose the icon and its veneration as a Christological heresy then he would be able to garner the full support of the bishops.

6.2.2.2.1 Nature of Images

One of Constantine’s surviving Enquiries pondered the relationship of images to their prototypes. In particular, Constantine argued that an image is only a true icon if it consists of exactly the same substance as its original. According to Constantine, “If an image does not present the exact shape of the forms making up the ‘personal countenance’ of its original, then it can never be an icon.”⁶⁷ Thus, for Constantine, a true icon must portray a person exactly as he or she really is; it must be an image “in which the totality of the original is preserved.”⁶⁸

Constantine went on to apply his definition of an image to the portrayal of the nature and person of Christ. If the divine nature of Christ is beyond comprehension and depiction, then it cannot be depicted; his humanity on the other hand can be portrayed. However, to portray only his humanity, Constantine argued, is to separate the two

⁶⁵ Most of the iconoclast literature was destroyed by iconophiles. However, these two tracts can be reconstructed from the Seventh Ecumenical Council and from the writings of Patriarch Nicephorus.

⁶⁶ Schönborn, God’s Human Face, 168.

⁶⁷ PG 100, 293A trans. by Krauth in Schönborn, God’s Human Face, 172.

⁶⁸ PG 100, 228D, ibid.
natures. This would be a fall into Nestorianism, named after Nestorius who was accused and condemned in 431 CE by the Third Ecumenical Council for teaching that there are two separate Persons in the Incarnate Christ instead of a single Person, at once God and man. To claim the capacity to depict the divinity of Christ, on the other hand, is to violate the incomprehensibility and uncircumscribability of God. According to Constantine, this would result in a mingling of the two natures into one nature, a fall into Monophysitism. Therefore, Constantine argued, there can be no icon of Christ because Christ cannot be depicted exactly as he is, both human and divine, two natures in one person. Constantine thus concluded, “Those who fashion icons of Christ . . . have not grasped the depth of the dogma regarding the unmixed union of the two natures in Christ,”69 since it is theologically impossible to depict the God-Man (theandros).

6.2.2.2 True Image is Eucharist

Though Constantine refused to accept the image of Christ as a true icon, in another Enquiry he argued that there is indeed the possibility of a true icon of Christ. He went on to introduce a new idea, namely that the eucharist is the only true representation of Christ. The eucharist, according to Constantine, is like the cross: a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice for humans which is able to preserve the two natures of Christ because “it recalls the Human Christ without sublimating the Divine.”70 Thus armed with a new iconoclast theology that was for the first time built upon a Christological foundation, Constantine was ready to take his combat against the iconophiles to the next level.

6.2.2.3 Council of Hiereia (754 CE)

69 PG 100, 329A, ibid., 168.

Leo III replaced the iconophile Patriarch Germanus with the iconoclast Patriarch Anastasius (730 – 754 CE), thus enabling him to effectively activate an iconoclast policy. Constantine now realized that he needed to take his father’s policies a step further to effectively enforce iconoclasm. Constantine was astute enough to realize that the only way to truly make iconoclasm the official policy of the empire was to convene an ecumenical council and make it the official doctrine of the Church. Consequently, toward the end of 753 CE, Constantine called a council to meet in the palace of Hieria in February of the following year.

6.2.2.3.1 Ecumenical?

One of the conditions for an ecumenical council, as noted earlier, is the attendance or representation of all five patriarchal sees. The Patriarch Anastasius of Constantinople died sometime toward the end of 753 CE, shortly before the council convened, and Constantine conveniently failed to replace him until the very last session of the council. Additionally, the Life of St. Stephen the Younger claims that the patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem refused to attend because they were well aware of Constantine’s underlying plans and motivations.71 Furthermore, there is no evidence suggesting that Rome had any inkling of the council. Hence, despite the fact that this council was attended by 164 more bishops than the Sixth Ecumenical Council (338 vs. 174), which can be explained partly by the fact that iconoclastic bishops were being appointed by iconoclastic emperors ever since 730 CE, not a single representative of the five patriarchal sees attended. This fact alone would later haunt the council’s legitimacy.

71 PG 100: 1118, 1142 – 46; cited in Herrin, Formation of Christendom, 368; Hussey, 39 argues that the three eastern patriarchs failed to come because they were living in Muslim territory and that the pope was too caught up in the struggle with the Lombards.
Although the proceedings of this council, like most other iconoclastic literature, have unfortunately been destroyed, they are nevertheless available through a later council. Thirty-three years after the Council of Hiereia, a new council would be called to overturn the iconoclast decrees of 754 CE. Indeed, determined to implement her own iconophile ideas, a Byzantine empress would soon play a pivotal role in drawing the first period of imperial iconoclastic policy to a close.
CHAPTER SEVEN

EMPRESS IRENE & THE SEVENTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL: TEMPORARY RESTORATION OF ICONS

Having looked into these matters with great diligence and deliberation, under the inspiration of the all-holy Spirit, we have also found that the unlawful art of the painters constitutes a blasphemy against this very fundamental doctrine of our salvation, that is, against the dispensation in Christ, and that it subverts these very holy and Ecumenical six councils, convened by God, while it reinstates Nestorius, who divided the one Son and Word of God, Who for us became man, into a duality of sons. Not only he, however, but also Arius and Dioscorus, and Eutyches and Severus, who, with regard to the two natures of the one Christ, teach that these were confused and mixed.

Definition of Council of Hiereia (754 CE)

In summary we preserve all the traditions of the Church, which for our sake have been decreed in written or unwritten form, without introducing an innovation. One of these traditions is the making of iconographic representations – being in accordance with the narrative of the proclamation of the gospel – for the purpose of ascertaining the incarnation of God the Word, which was real, not imaginary, and for being of an equal benefit to us as the gospel narrative.

Definition of the 7th Ecumenical Council (787 CE)

7.1 Imperial & Patriarchal Regime Change: Iconoclast to Iconophile

On Nov. 1, 769 CE, shortly after her arrival from her native Athenian home, Irene made her grand entrance into Constantinople. She was met there by the “prominent men of the City and their wives who led the way before her.” Two days later she was betrothed to Emperor Leo IV (775 – 780 CE) and six weeks later, on Dec. 17, she was crowned Empress in the hall of the Augustus. Following her imperial coronation, she proceeded to the chapel of St. Stephen where she received the marital crown.

Two years after their marriage, on Jan. 14, 771 CE, Irene and Leo had their first son. Following a common tradition, he was named after his iconoclast grandfather,

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Emperor Constantine V. Though still ruling the empire, Constantine’s life, which Theophanes described as “polluted … with much Christian blood, with the invocation of demons to whom he sacrificed, with the persecution of the holy churches and of the true and immaculate faith, furthermore with the slaying of monks and the profanation of monasteries,” came to an end four years later on Sep. 14, 775, after a 34 year reign.

7.1.1 Leo IV Assumes Throne

Upon the death of his father, the imperial throne now belonged solely to Leo IV.\(^2\) Shortly after taking the throne, Leo was approached by a multitude of soldiers and citizens of Constantinople who asked him to crown his young son Constantine VI Emperor, purportedly to have a successor in place should the need arise. However, Leo initially resisted this request and answered “according to imperial custom: ‘My son is an only child and I am afraid of doing so lest I suffer the fate of all men and, while he is an infant, you put him to death and appoint another.’”\(^3\) Nevertheless, after five days of persistent petitioning from the people, Leo finally succumbed. He ordered Constantine VI to be crowned and the people to swear that they would never accept any emperor besides himself, his son, or their descendants.\(^4\) Little did Leo realize the ramifications of such a pledge, for in the end, it would allow his iconophile wife Irene to come to power.

7.1.1.1 Leo IV’s Iconoclast Colors Surface

While Constantine V had been a ruthless persecutor of the Church and adamantly opposed to icons, his son Leo IV initially appeared to be more lenient. According to

\(^2\) Ibid., 619.

\(^3\) Ibid., 620.

\(^4\) Constantine VI was crowned on April 14, 776 CE.
Theophanes, “he appeared to be pious and a friend of the holy Mother of God and of the monks.” However, in less than five years his true colors became very apparent. During “mid-week” of Lent in 780 CE, Leo had several men arrested for venerating icons and “had them scourged and tonsured and, after parading them in chains…, confined them in the Praetorium.”

In a later account of this same “mid-week” of Lent, Leo found two icons under the pillow of his wife Irene. Upon further investigation, Leo learned that the eunuch in charge of the palace buildings (the papias) and his staff were responsible for smuggling them into Irene. As a result, Leo unleashed his anger upon both the smugglers and his wife Irene: he “subjected them to many tortures and punishments” and rebuked Irene and “spurned her and had no more marital relations with her.” Leo’s cruelty, however, would come full circle soon enough.

7.1.2 Widowed Empress Irene Assumes Throne

On Sep. 8, 781 CE, within a year of his iconoclastic outlash against his wife, Emperor Leo IV died. Rumors immediately began circulating that his sudden death was a punishment for stealing a votive crown from Hagia Sophia. According to Theophanes, Leo’s inordinate addiction to precious stones caused him to become “enamoured of the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{5}}\text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{6}}\text{Ibid., 625.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{7}}\text{Ibid., 626, n. 9; see also, Steven Runciman, “The Empress Irene the Athenian,” in \textit{Medieval Women}, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 103: Runciman argues that this account is probably untrue. Regardless of the authenticity of the details, however, the point remains the same: Irene was an iconophile.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{8}}\text{Treadgold, \textit{Byzantine Revival}, 61.}\]
crown of the Great Church, which he took and wore on his head.” Consequently, Theophanes continues, Leo contracted carbuncles on his head, developed a high fever, and died, thus leaving an empty throne and a widowed empress.

With a signed oath committing the Eastern Roman Empire to the throne of Leo’s descendants and with Leo’s son Constantine only 10 years old, Irene was in place to assume power. The chronicler Theophanes interpreted this turn of events as a miracle of God

so that in this matter also God might be glorified though a widow and her orphan son as He was about to overthrow the boundless impiety directed against Himself and His servants and the oppression of all the churches by God’s adversary Constantine; just as aforetime He had overthrown the Devil by the weak hands of fishermen and illiterate folk. Indeed, the effects of this transfer of power to the Empress Irene were felt almost immediately. According to Theophanes, “the pious began to speak freely. God’s word spread about, those who sought salvation were able to renounce the world without hindrance, God’s praises rose up to heaven, the monasteries recovered, and all good things were manifested.” However, her reign would be no different from that of other rulers: she would have her fair share of troubles.

7.1.3 Patriarch Paul IV Paves Way for Icon Restoration

At the end of Emperor Leo’s reign, the last iconoclast patriarch of Constantinople, Niketas, died on Feb. 20, 780 CE. A lector named Paul, originally from the island of Cyprus and described by Theophanes as “venerable” and “a man who excelled both in

9 Theophanes, Chronicle, 625; see also Treadgold, Byzantine Revival, 60; Leo’s father Constantine also died of a fever resulting from carbuncles on his legs: see Theophanes, Chronicle, 615.

10 Ibid., 626.

11 Ibid., 627.
culture and in action,” was elected to fill the patriarchal shoes of the deceased Niketas.\textsuperscript{12} Leo had already demonstrated his iconoclastic sentiments and the last thing Paul wanted was to find himself in a position like his predecessor Germanus sixty-five years earlier in which he would be forced to oppose the emperor. Nevertheless, after Paul had “strenuously excused himself,” and although still “under much duress…on account of the prevailing heresy” of “icon-worship,” he finally acquiesced and accepted the patriarchal post of Constantinople.\textsuperscript{13} Within a year and a half the emperor Leo died, thus opening up new possibilities for the restoration of icons.

\textbf{7.1.3.1 Paul Falls Ill & Flees Patriarchal Post for Monasticism}

Four years after his ordination, in August of 784 CE, the patriarch Paul IV fell ill. Fearful of God’s judgment, he secretly abandoned his patriarchal post and fled for the Monastery of St. Florus to take up the monastic life. When Irene discovered Paul’s unusual departure, she and her son Constantine immediately initiated a search and once found, he was interrogated to ascertain why he had left his patriarchal post. According to Theophanes, he responded in tears: “Would that I had not sat at all on the throne of priesthood while God’s Church was suffering oppression, separated as she was from the other catholic thrones and subject to anathema.”\textsuperscript{14} Paul was all too aware of the ramifications of the previous five decades of imperial iconoclasm upon the Church, especially the schism it had created between Constantinople and Rome, Egypt, and Syria. Indeed, the Church of Constantinople had been anathematized and Paul feared the wrath of God for playing a part in this process.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 625.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 631.
Irene, however, saw this as an opportunity. Indeed, Treadgold argues that the initial meeting between Paul and Irene provided the perfect opportunity for empress and patriarch to coordinate an effort to overturn iconoclasm. As the two most powerful figures of Byzantium, the proposition of an ecumenical council by the patriarch with the empress standing approvingly at his side would have wielded great influence upon the people. Treadgold concludes that with Paul speaking for Irene, she “gained the benefit of the dying patriarch’s moral authority and avoided exposing herself to the resentment of possible opponents any more than necessary.”

7.1.3.2 Paul Calls for Ecumenical Council

Irene thus summoned a select group of Senate leaders to hear Patriarch Paul’s explanation for his unusual behavior. Instead of providing an excuse for his actions, however, Paul harshly rebuked his inquirers: “Unless an ecumenical council takes place and the error that is in your midst is corrected, you will not find salvation.” If these were his true convictions, however, the Senate leaders were perplexed to understand how and why Paul had agreed to not venerate icons when he was ordained into the patriarchate under Emperor Leo IV. Patriarch Paul explained himself with a heart-felt repentant response: “For this very reason I am weeping and have taken refuge in repentance, praying to God that He should not punish me as a priest who has remained silent until now and has not preached the truth from fear of your fury.” Although Paul died immediately after he finished his explanation, according to Theophanes, the ploy he

15 Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, 76.

16 Ibid.

17 Theophanes, 631.

18 Ibid.
and Irene had concocted was effective, for “from that time onwards the question of holy icons began to be openly discussed and disputed by everyone.”

While the patriarchal throne was vacant yet again, Paul’s death and the actions he took in his last days provided an opportunity for the Empress Irene to initiate a change in the empire’s policy toward icons.

7.1.4 Empress Irene Organizes Pivotal Patriarchal Election

The patriarch of Constantinople played an integral role in the smooth functioning of the imperial government, particularly in its relationship to the Church. With the patriarchal throne vacant upon Paul’s death, Irene stepped into her new imperial role effectively by organizing an election of a new patriarch. She began by inviting a crowd of citizens, clergy, and senators to her palace to discuss possible candidates. She then asked the crowd to search for a man who would be able to care for them “like a shepherd and to fortify the Church with his words of instruction.”

7.1.4.1 Iconophile Tarasius Elected with Conditional Acceptance

The unanimous choice for the patriarchal position was the imperial secretary (ascretis) Tarasius. However, Tarasius had already refused the possibility of such an offer in private talks with Irene. The throng of people, however, stubbornly refused to accept any nominee other than Tarasius and he was thus compelled to explain himself.

Tarasius explained that, in addition to being a layman and therefore canonically unable to become patriarch, he felt unworthy and incapable of bearing the burden of such a prominent ecclesiastical position. Furthermore, he appealed to the same argument that patriarch Paul IV had previously made: with the Church of Constantinople teaching

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 632.
against icon-veneration on the one hand and fellow-believing Christians in Rome, Egypt, and Syria teaching for icon-veneration, the Church was “divided and torn asunder” and the Church of Constantinople was thus “estranged from them all and . . . every day anathematized by them.”\(^{21}\)

According to Tarasius, an anathema was no light matter, but a “terrible thing” that “drives one far from God, it pushes one away from the kingdom of heaven and leads to the outer darkness.”\(^{22}\) Indeed, Tarasius continued, the Church doesn’t “recognize dissension or dispute,” but instead, just as it confesses one baptism and one faith and defines itself as one catholic and apostolic church in its creed, it also confesses “a single consensus on all ecclesiastical matters.”\(^{23}\)

7.1.4.1.1 Tarasius Requests Ecumenical Council

For Tarasius, there was only one solution to this problem of a divided Church. He thus his defense with one final request, one that had also already been suggested by Paul IV:

Wherefore we ask, O brethren . . . , that an ecumenical council be convened by our most pious and orthodox emperors so that we, who belong to the one God, should be made one; that we, who belong to the Trinity, should be united and be of one mind and of equal honour; that we, the one body of Christ who is our head, should be fitted and joined together; that we, who belong to the Holy Spirit, should stand by one another and not one against the other; that we, who belong to the Truth, should believe and say the same things; so that there should not be a dispute and division among us, but that the peace of God that surpasses all understanding should guard all of us.\(^{24}\)

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 633.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
Tarasius concluded his argument with a conditional concession, promising to accept the position if his request for an ecumenical council was granted or to refuse the position, for fear of being anathematized by God, if it was denied. The Empress Irene and the people agreed to Tarasius’ request and thus appeased, he agreed to the election. The real work, however, was yet to come.

7.2 Diplomatic Preparations for Ecumenical Council

Conscious that opposition to overturning the imperial policy of iconoclasm was a certainty, Irene and Tarasius followed a slow and cautious path as they sought to garner support for their iconophile cause.25 The first step toward convening a council, following the ordination of Tarasius on Christmas Day of 784 CE, was to send a proposal to the other patriarchal sees: Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem.

7.2.1 Letters of Invitation to Eastern Patriarchates

A temporary respite from war with the Arabs that had been established in 782 CE was about to be broken by Irene, who planned on withholding tribute payment in April of 785 CE. Tarasius thus hastily sent a letter to each of the three patriarchates of the East to announce his orthodox doctrine, particularly in regards to icons, apologized for being elevated to the patriarchate from the laity, and requested representatives to bring a letter of reply to be read at the council.26

Conflict with the Arabs, however, broke out too soon. As a result, the letters did not successfully make their way to the patriarchates. However, they did make their way

25 Treadgold, Byzantine Revival, 77.

26 Ibid.
into the hands of some monks at an Egyptian monastery who sent back a reply explaining the political situation, namely that the patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch were not in a position to safely communicate and that the patriarch of Jerusalem was in exile. However, they also sent a copy of a letter written by a former patriarch of Jerusalem to the patriarchs of Antioch and Alexandria that clearly condemned the policy of iconoclasm. Furthermore, two monks who had previously served the patriarchs of Antioch and Alexandria – John, the Presbyter and Patriarchal secretary, and Thomas, the Presbyter and Abbot of the monastery of Father Arsenius in Egypt – were sent as their representatives.\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{7.2.2 Letters of Invitation to Pope Hadrian I}

Later that year, Irene and Tarasius both sent letters to Pope Hadrian I (772 – 797 CE) in Rome. In an effort to renew the relations between East and West, Tarasius sent a declaration of faith to receive recognition from the Pope as the legitimate Patriarch of Constantinople, a long-standing tradition that had been done away with by the three previous iconoclast patriarchs. Likewise, Irene sent a humble letter of invitation to Hadrian in which she opened by confessing the past errors of the Church at Constantinople:

\begin{quote}
Your paternal blessedness knows what hath been done in times past in this our royal city against the venerable images, how those who reigned immediately before us destroyed them and subjected them to disgrace and injury…and how they seduced and brought over to their own opinion all the people who live in these parts.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 77 – 78.

Following her confession, she went on to inform the Pope that times were changing: now that she and her son Constantine had been elevated to the imperial throne, truth and the tradition of the Apostles and Fathers of the Church would be zealously pursued first and foremost. Indeed, the decision had been made to call an ecumenical council and the Pope was invited to attend and aid “in the confirmation and establishment of the ancient tradition of venerable images.”

Although the pope himself did not attend, he did send in his stead two representatives: Peter the Protopresbyter of Rome, and Peter the Presbyter and Abbot of the monastery of St. Sabbas. Irene and Tarasios clearly understood the importance of having the patriarchal sees present at the council to insure its ecumenicity.

7.3 The Seventh Ecumenical Council

By Aug. 1, 786 CE, a throng of bishops, archbishops and monks had assembled in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. They had already begun reading Scripture and discussing the issue of icons in the presence of the emperors when the session was suddenly interrupted.

7.3.1 First Attempt Dispersed by Imperial Army

The first session came to a swift end when imperial troops still faithful to Emperor Constantine V arrived and “bared their swords . . . threatening to kill the archbishop as well as the orthodox bishops and abbots.”

There were also bishops in attendance who clung to their iconoclastic beliefs and shouted in support of the troops. Despite Irene’s brave attempts to thwart this rebellion, however, she quickly realized that the only way to maintain her imperial position and achieve her iconophile goals was to

\[29\] Ibid.

\[30\] Theophanes, Chronicle, 635.
temporarily compromise by submitting to the iconoclast soldiers’ demand to disperse the council. Irene was confident there would be another opportunity.

7.3.2 Second Attempt Convenes

Undaunted and determined to convene and complete the ecumenical council she had promised Patriarch Tarasius, Irene acted quickly and decisively. She immediately sent her adviser Staurakius (eunuch, patrikios, and logothete) to Thrace to recruit the Asiatic themata. Fortunately for Irene, Staurakius successfully persuaded the soldiers to help her cleanse Constantinople of the iconoclastic and rebellious soldiers who had disrupted the initial council attempt. Hence, they subsequently entered Constantinople, took control of the City, and helped Irene form her own army with soldiers faithful and obedient to her. As a result, by May of 787 CE, she was able to once again send letters of invitation to the bishops and archbishops, inviting them to yet another attempt at an ecumenical council.

7.3.2.1 Brilliant & Symbolic Change of Venue

This second council attempt, however, would be held in the nearby city of Nicaea, a brilliant move by Irene with deep symbolic significance. This was the very site where Constantine the Great had called the First Ecumenical Council (325 CE). Additionally, Irene was surely suggesting a comparison between her and her son Constantine VI with Helena and Constantine the Great. Furthermore, she had decided not to be present at the council’s opening. In contrast to the emperors Leo III and Constantine V, who had imposed their will upon the church and thereby provoked attack by the likes of Pope Gregory II and Monk John Damascene, Irene was determined to trust the decision making of the bishops and monks. As Treadgold concludes, Irene’s brilliant planning
allowed her to overcome “the failure of her first attempt to restore the icons” and she consequently “emerged . . . more powerful than ever.”

7.3.3 Council Begins

The Patriarch Tarasius was in charge of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. After arranging a series of seven meetings from Sep. 24 to Oct. 13, 787 CE in the Hagia Sophia, Tarasius and his patriarchal staff, along with the papal representatives and the monks representing the eastern patriarchates who had been retained in Constantinople by Irene, were now on their way to the city of Nicaea. Additionally, 252 bishops arrived for the first session; 113 additional bishops arrived shortly thereafter; and 131 abbots and other monks and assistants were also present. Following six more sessions, the eighth and concluding session was held back in Constantinople on Oct. 13 of the same year.

7.3.3.1 Overview of Council’s Eight Sessions

Tarasius opened the first session with a brief address that drew attention to those bishops who had helped break up the first council attempt. The imperial secretary followed his speech by reading a letter from Irene and Constantine that guaranteed the council delegates complete freedom of speech (despite the fact that Tarasius had already excluded ten iconoclast bishops from the council!). Immediately after the reading of the emperors’ letter, the iconoclast bishops were invited in to the session to repent and condemn the Council of Hiereia through written statements. However, only three were admitted; the admission of the other seven was postponed, including Gregory Neocaesarea who wasn’t even present yet, because of their accused plotting against the first council attempt.

31 Treadgold, Byzantine Revival, 82.

32 Ibid., 83.
During the second session, translations of Pope Hadrian’s replies to the letters of invitation from Tarasiss and the emperors were read. Hadrian had responded with a clear iconophile position as he condemned imperial iconoclasm and the Council of Hiereia. Tarasius and the council delegates wholeheartedly agreed with Hadrian with short declarations and then signed the official acts in support of Hadrian.

The third session was spent reviewing the letters of Tarasis to the Eastern patriarchates as well as the letter returned by their representatives, the Egyptian monks. It was at this session that the remaining seven iconoclast bishops were finally accepted.

The fourth session presented the research Tarasius’ staff had conducted, primarily the production of patristic proof texts that supported icons and their veneration. They emphasized, however, that many of the patristic texts used at the Council of Hiereia were quoted out of context. At the end of a long day, a summary of the session was read and everyone present signed it.

The fifth session continued the work of the fourth by supplying more patristic passages. This time, however, the focus was an attempt to demonstrate that iconoclasm was in fact a heresy. Tarasius’ assistants showed various books from the patriarchal library in which short passages had literally been cut out, and thus taken completely out of context. At the end of the day, after two days of citing patristic texts in support of icons, the patriarchal assistant reading the texts claimed he had fifteen more books of evidence if the council was interested. By this point, however, the delegates were sufficiently satisfied by the arguments and so exhausted that they concluded the session, though not before blaming Muslims and Jews for influencing iconoclastic attitudes.

The sixth session was prepared beforehand by Tarasius and his staff. In addition to refuting the Council of Hiereia point-by-point, it humiliated Gregory of Neocaesarea,
one of the last seven iconoclast bishops to be forgiven, by having him read each decree of the Council of Hiereia.

At the seventh session, the decrees of the ecumenical council were read aloud and signed by all the bishops. The session was concluded with a series of anathemas against iconoclasts, along with a series of acclamations of the orthodox faithful. Additionally, Tarasius sent a letter from this session to the emperors and clergy of Constantinople to announce the restoration of icons and hence a renewal of church unity.

Finally, the delegates of the Seventh Ecumenical Council walked to Constantinople where they were welcomed by the Empress Irene. The eighth and final session of the council was held on Oct. 23 with Irene and Constantine presiding. The Definition of the Council was officially decreed and signed by the emperors and was then read aloud, along with portions of the fourth session. The new imperial policy was thus made public to the citizens and soldiers of Constantinople in an effort to renew the role of icons as an authentic tradition of the church.

Of these eight sessions, however, the sixth session was of particular importance. This session not only preserved the Definition of the iconoclastic Council of Hiereia in 754 CE, but it also provided the council’s articulation of its new iconophile Definition through its point-by-point refutation of the Council of Hiereia. Tuning in to this session will thus provide a more detailed exploration of the contours of both sides of the theological debate over icons.

7.4 Sixth Session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council

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33 See appendix D for a full account of the Definition of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787 CE.
After everyone had taken their seats, including over 350 bishops, archbishops, archimandrites, abbots and monks, Leo the secretary reviewed the contents of the previous session and then directed the participants attention to the subject at hand:

Today . . . we have in our hands the written blasphemy of these accusers of the Christians, that is the absurd, refutable, and self-condemned Definition of the pseudo gathering . . . We also have for this [Definition] an elaborate and most effective Refutation which the Holy Spirit has made available to us. For the [Definition] must be triumphantly defeated by refutations of wisdom, and shredded by vigorous scrutiny.34

Responding to Leo, the Council proclaimed: “Let this be read.”35 So began the Sixth Session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (henceforth referred to as the Council of 787) which proceeded to refute each and every point made by the iconoclastic Definition of Hieriea (henceforth referred to as the Council of 754), covering topics such as the ecumenicity of the Council of 754, the antiquity and authenticity of the iconographic tradition, the interpretation of Scriptural and patristic passages pertaining to icons, the accusations of icons promoting heresy, and the theological implications of icons.

7.4.1 Council of Hieriea: Ecumenical?

The iconophiles initiated their argument with the very first line of the Definition of the Council of 754: “The DEFINITION of the holy, great, and Ecumenical Seventh Council.”36 First, they argued that the Council of 754 was not holy, but “cursed, profane, and intrusive” because the participants called the icon of Christ an idol, “as the icon of


35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 52.
Satan.”  Second, the council was not great or ecumenical, since it did not have the participation of the Roman Pope (not even through a representative or letter) nor the consent of the patriarchs of the eastern apostolic thrones. Finally, the Council of 754 could not possibly be considered ecumenical because it did not concur with the previous six ecumenical councils.

To illustrate their point, the iconophiles argued that if one laid down six golden coins followed by a copper coin, this copper coin would not be called the seventh golden coin. In the same way, the iconophiles continued, the Council of 754 had “nothing golden or valuable in its teaching, but being actually inferior to copper, a counterfeit, full of deadly poison, it is not worthy to be counted with the six most reverend councils which are sparkling with the golden utterance of the Spirit.” Indeed, the fact that no decree had been promulgated against icons in the previous six ecumenical councils was very significant to the iconophiles.

7.4.2 Antiquity and Authenticity of Icons

The iconophiles believed that the icon was an ancient, and therefore authentic, tradition of the Church. They argued that the painting of icons was a tradition, just like the gospel, that had been handed down from generation to generation in the Church, “before the holy councils, as well as after them,” and “since the time of the preaching of the Apostles, as we learn from looking at the holy churches in every place, as the holy

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 61.
Fathers have testified and as the historians, whose writings have survived until today, relate.\textsuperscript{40}

The Council of 787 thus argued that icons were used during the first 300 years of Christianity, from the ascent of Christ to the time of Constantine the Great. In order to preserve the memory of Christian martyrs during that period, the iconophiles claimed that surviving Christians built churches and “painted in them scenes related to the incarnation of our God, as well as other stories related to the contests of martyrs,” while others “painted on boards the icon either of their desired martyr or even of Christ Himself.”\textsuperscript{41} Although evidence for the claim of icons being painted on boards is difficult to produce for this time period, there had clearly been paintings of Biblical scenes and symbolic portraits of Christ in the catacombs and in at least one private house church beginning in the third century. While the question of their presence in the first and second centuries is debatable, the possibility certainly exists. More importantly, however, the iconophiles had no problem producing ample evidence for the centuries following the conversion of Constantine.

The iconophiles set forth an array of literary evidence – both patristic and conciliar – for ecclesiastical support of icons from the fourth century on. They included examples in which esteemed Church Fathers such as Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and even Epiphanius (one of the most common patristic sources cited against icons!) provided clear support for icons as a legitimate component of the Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{42} They also read a lengthy passage in which the

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 59.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 60.

\textsuperscript{42} See appendix C for a list of pertinent passages.
fourth-century lawyer turned bishop, Asterius of Amasea (380 – 390), meticulously described and praised an icon depicting the passion and martyrdom of St. Euphemia. However, their strongest support was provided by the decree to portray the humanity of Christ in Canon 82 of the Council of Trullo. As the iconophiles noted, the canons of this council were decreed by many of the same bishops who had convened at the Sixth Ecumenical Council a decade earlier and it was an indisputable fact that the veneration of icons had become a widespread practice long before the Sixth Ecumenical Council met. Hence, the combination of patristic and conciliar evidence for ecclesiastical support of icons gave the iconophiles a solid case for the antiquity and authenticity of the icon. However, the iconoclasts had also presented literary evidence, both patristic and biblical, in support of their argument against icons at the Council of 754.

7.4.3 Patristic Hermeneutics

The iconoclast Council of 754 claimed that icons were not an ancient and authentic tradition. Instead, according to the iconoclasts, they clearly contradicted the teachings of the previous six Ecumenical Councils. However, if the iconoclasts were correct, then the iconophiles wondered how it could be that “those very divine Fathers of ours who, for the purpose of teaching and in their desire to accentuate the mystery of our salvation, and using the art of painters reproduced them inside the venerable churches?” Furthermore, the Council of 787 demanded clarification and solid evidence for such a

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44 See p. 76.

45 Ibid., 75 – 76.
claim, for according to the iconophiles, the iconoclasts “make pronouncements without providing proofs.”

The problem, however, was the fact that both the iconophile Council of 787 and the iconoclast Council of 754 cited passages from the Church Fathers as one of their most authoritative sources for their respective arguments. As a result, the resolution of the question of the icon’s antiquity, authenticity, and legitimacy hinged partly on the hermeneutics of patristic texts. The Seventh Ecumenical Council, however, effectively demonstrated the manner in which the Council of Hieria had misused many of their sources to present their case against icons, whether by forgery, fabrication, fragmentation, or manipulation.

7.4.3.1 Epiphanius: Forged Source

One of the first sources presented by the iconoclast Council of 754 was Epiphanius of Cyprus. The iconoclasts claimed that he had commanded Christians to not bring icons into churches, cemeteries of the saints, or even into public places. Instead, Christians were to remember God in their hearts. According to Epiphanius, “the Christian must not be lifted up through the eyes or though the reverie of the mind.”

The iconophiles, however, questioned the authenticity of this cited passage. Other works had been falsely attributed to authors, including the “Letter of Laodiceans.” Initially attributed to St. Paul, the Fathers eventually rejected his authorship unanimously. In the same way, claimed the iconophiles, this statement against icons was not actually written by Epiphanius.

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46 Ibid., 77.

47 Ibid., 117.

48 Ibid., 118.
One of Epiphanius’ most widely known works was the *Panarion*, a treatise consisting of 80 chapters against heresies. The Council of 787 noted that icons were not mentioned at all in this work. They thus concluded that if Epiphanius had really believed that icons were an unacceptable tradition, he would have surely included them as one of the heresies in that work. Additionally, the time period of Epiphanius’ life was significant for the iconophiles. He had lived in the fourth and fifth centuries and therefore, the iconophiles continued, if the Church had accepted this text as authoritative, icons would have certainly been abolished long before the eighth century. Moreover, according to the iconophiles, the disciples of Epiphanius built a church on the island of Cyprus named after Epiphanius, “with many iconographic representations inside, including one of St Epiphanius himself.”49 Surely, the iconophiles reasoned, his disciples would not have painted an icon of him inside a church dedicated to him if he truly “despised the sight of colours.”50 Thus, the iconophiles concluded that this text against icons, purportedly written by Epiphanius, was a forged document and had never been accepted by the catholic Church. As a result, the Council of 787 followed a precedent. The Fourth and Fifth Ecumenical Councils had determined that a certain Letter of Iba, Bishop of Edessa, to Mares the Persian, was not in fact written by Iba and went on to condemn the letter for supporting Nestorianism while still affirming the orthodoxy of Iba himself. Hence, the Council of 787 condemned the document claimed to have been

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.
penned by Epiphanius while simultaneously affirming the sanctity and orthodoxy of Epiphanius.\textsuperscript{51}

\textbf{7.4.3.2 Theodotus: Fabricated Source}

In a similar fashion, the iconophiles refuted an iconoclastic appeal to a text attributed to Theodotus of Ancara. This text argued that the Church had not received a tradition “on icons with colours which are material” and concluded that the iconophile idea that icons provide some sort of benefit to the believer, such as lifting the believer up to a higher level of spiritual contemplation, is “Obviously . . . vain and an invention of diabolic cunning.”\textsuperscript{52} Following a diligent search for this statement in Theodotus’ writings, the iconophiles concluded that this text was not written by Theodotus. Instead, they believed it was clearly a fabrication: “If, as they claim, they produced this testimony from his works, they ought to have stated explicitly the discourse from which this passage was taken. However, knowing that this is a fabrication, they let the falsehood rest in silence.”\textsuperscript{53} Hence, the iconophiles concluded, the iconoclasts of the Council of 754 “are clearly found to be forgers of the truth.”\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{7.4.3.3 Amphilochius: Fragmented Source}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 120.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 134. Even when the Council of 754 was in session, the iconoclasts did not read this passage from a book but instead let it circulate “like a plague by means of a pseudo-message.” Pseudo-message from Greek \textit{pseudo pittakion} = tablet containing a short message, intimating that the text was uncritically accepted by the council and accepted in its decrees without verification. Gregory of Neocaesarea and Theodotus of Amonrium were both participants in the Council of 754 and testified at the Council of 787 that no books were read during Council of 754 against icons; instead, only short extracts (\textit{pittakia}) were read.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
Citing a more blatant opposition to icons, the Council of 754 turned to Amphilochius of Iconium. He once stated that Christians should not “depict on boards with colours the carnal faces of the saints.”55 Instead, Amphilochius continued, Christians ought “to imitate their conduct through virtue.”56 The iconophiles responded by noting that heretics frequently “present statements in a fragmented form,” and if one were to diligently examine the complete writings of Amphilochius, they would “nowhere find the intention of the Father to prohibit the reproduction of venerable icons.”57

Although the passage cited by the iconoclasts seemed to oppose icons, the iconophiles argued that the true purpose of Amphilochius was not to refute or undermine icons, but to instead “force our focus upon their virtues [of the saints] and not merely the representation.”58 According to the iconophiles, a common rhetorical device was to exaggerate a point being made at the expense of other valid points: “It is customary for our holy Fathers . . . in teaching us to keep the commandments to exaggerate and to direct the listeners to that commandment which they have set as their target, by declaring this to be a high one, the greatest.”59

Consequently, Christians depicted saints to see their stories and thus imitate their virtues. It would make no sense, the iconophiles argued, to build churches dedicated to saints and paint their icons inside only to ignore their virtues. Nor would it make sense, they continued, to

55 Ibid., 125.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 127.
praise a man if he saw him on the one hand dedicating icons to them day after
day, or building many churches . . . without decorating the temple of himself with
virtues inspired by God. . . . One would not be able to attain virtue unless he
walked through the courts of the Lord, through reading gave ear to the divine
discourses, and through site led himself to feel the meaning and the message of
the gospel, of the narratives of the victories of the martyrs. . . . However, to
inscribe many crosses in a little house while disregarding the commandments of
Christ and the imitation of his sufferings make no sense, because faith without
works is dead.60

Thus, just as biographies of saints had been left “for our benefit and for the purpose of
our salvation,” so too paintings were left to explain their deeds “so that our mind may
remember them, and so that we may be lifted up to the level of their conduct.”61 St. Basil
also affirmed this function of the icon in his Encomium to the Holy Forty Martyrs when
he said that both writers and painters present the feats and excellence of saints, “some by
embellishing them with speech and others by painting them on panels,” thus arousing the
courage and determination of many and proving that what “speech presents through
hearing by giving an account, painting does show, although silently, by the art of
representation.”62

7.4.3.4 Gregory of Nyssa: Manipulated Source

In the same way that the iconoclasts had twisted the intent of Amphilochius’
statement, the iconophiles produced yet another example of iconoclast manipulation of
sources. The Council of 754 cited a passage from Gregory of Nyssa which said that the
devil reintroduced idolatry into the Church by subtly persuading Christians to adore the
creation and “consider that which is made as God, calling it with the name ‘Christ.’”63

60 Ibid., 126 – 127.

61 Ibid., 104.

62 St Basil, To the Holy Forty Martyrs, Homily 19, PG 31:508c – 509a; trans. by Sahas in ibid.

63 Ibid., 62.
Though accurately citing Gregory word for word, the iconoclasts twisted the meaning by pulling the passage out of its original context. When read in light of the entire text, it was readily apparent to the iconophiles that this passage was written against the Arians who taught that Jesus was a creature instead of the divine Son of God. Hence, Gregory was actually criticizing the Arians who argued that Christians, because they worshipped Jesus who was a mere man, were idolaters. Consequently, the Council of 787 concluded that what the Fathers wrote against the Arians, the iconoclasts “used instead to attack the painting of venerable icons.” Indeed, the fact that icons had frequently been associated with idolatry (from their very inception, in fact; see Ch. 4) proved very useful to the iconoclasts and they took full advantage of this deep-rooted idea at the Council of 754.

7.4.4 Icons or Idols?

The Council of 754 accused the iconophiles of being idolaters who worshipped the created world instead of the creator. The iconophiles, however, explicitly denied any such accusation. According to the Council of 787, they had never called icons gods or worshipped them as gods and they certainly had never placed their hope for salvation in them or expected judgment from them. Although they admitted that they had indeed kissed them and venerated them because they were “made in, and devoted to” God, this did not mean that they worshipped them. In fact, they argued the very opposite as demonstrated by the following confession:

We confess that You [God] have delivered us from the deception and the error of idols. After we came to know You, we, who were deemed worthy of divine regeneration, in no way deviated in offering the divine adoration that belongs to You to any creature under the sky but You, our only Saviour; and we sing: ‘O Lord, we know not any other beside Thee: we name thy name. And in order that all our senses be reminded, so that we may be lifted up towards your majesty, we

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64 Ibid., 63.
have, as a way of glorifying You, the figure of the holy cross, the narrative of the gospel, and the iconographic representations, as well as many other consecrated utensils which we kiss, because they have been made in, and devoted to, your name.\textsuperscript{65}

The devotion of the iconophiles was thus clearly directed toward God. Indeed, the idea of icons being idolatrous seemed absurd to them.

\textbf{7.4.4.1 Deceptive Colors or Narrative Gospel?}

The Council of 754, however, had argued that icons were a “deceptive work of likenesses with colours which lowers the human mind from the high worship proper to God down to the base and material worship of creatures.”\textsuperscript{66} By calling icons “deceptive works of colours,” however, the iconophiles argued that the iconoclasts were slandering the Church and the gospel itself. Indeed, the Council of 787 believed that icons were painted reminders of the gospel, “For when [the faithful] hear the gospel with the ears, they exclaim ‘glory to Thee, O Lord,’ and when they see it with their eyes, they send forth exactly the same doxology, for we are reminded of his life among men. That which the narrative declares in writing is the same as that which the icon does [in colours].”\textsuperscript{67} Furthermore, the iconophiles continued, “when we receive the sound of the reading with our ears, we transmit it to our mind, so by looking with our eyes at the painted icons, we are enlightened in our mind. Through two things following each other, that is, by reading and also by seeing the reproduction of the painting, we learn the same thing, that is, how

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 124 – 125.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 68.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 69.
to recall what has taken place.”

Thus, for the iconophiles, icons were simply a means of communicating the gospel that was equivalent to the written and spoken word.

7.4.4.2 Material Worship or Means to God?

In an even more convincing refutation of the iconoclastic accusation of idolatry, the Council of 787 turned to the Old Testament. The Council of 787 observed that, “in order to show that everything is to the service of God,” when Moses was making the Tabernacle in direct obedience to God, he “made perceptible Cherubim in the form of men – antitypes of the spiritual ones.”

Indeed, God instructed Moses to place the Cherubim over the seat of expiation, which Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has pointed out should be seen as a prefiguring of the crucified Christ as the true “place of expiation.”

Consequently, the iconophiles concluded that Moses introduced the Israelites to the knowledge of God through two actions: “by saying Thou shalt bow down to God and Him only shalt thou worship, and by having made Cherubim of molten gold which were overshadowing the seat of expiation, that is, bowing to Him, He led them up to bow

68 Ibid., 61.

69 Ibid., 110.

70 See 1 John 2:2: “and he [Christ] is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, The Spirit of the Liturgy, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), 116, notes that the “icon of the Resurrection of Christ takes up this link between the Ark of the Covenant and the Paschal Mystery of Christ when it shows Christ standing on cross-shaped slabs, which symbolize the grave but also suggest a reference to the kapporeth [seat of expiation] of the Old Covenant. Christ is flanked by the cherubim and approached by the women who came to the tomb to anoint him. The fundamental image of the Old Testament is retained, but it is reshaped in the light of the Resurrection and given a new center: the God who no longer completely conceals himself but now shows himself in the form of the Son.”
down to God the Lord and Him only to worship by both sight and hearing!” Hence, icons were not only a painted version of the gospels, but for the iconophiles they were also a means toward God. The iconoclasts on the other hand, not only opposed icons as idolatrous, but also proposed a true icon of their own that served as a means toward God.

### 7.4.5 Iconoclast Innovation

The Council of 787 argued that Christians “confess that what the icon has in common with the archetype is only the name, not the essence.” Indeed, the iconophiles maintained that the icon was clearly distinct from its prototype: “the one is inanimate, the other animate.” The iconophiles thus concluded that icons were “nothing more than icons, in so far as they bear the name only, not the essence, of the prototype.”

Iconoclasts, on the other hand, following the creative mind of Emperor Constantine V, claimed that no difference existed between an icon and its essence. Consequently, the Council of 754 claimed that the eucharist was the only true icon Christ handed down to Christians. Indeed, “in place of [Himself] and as a most vivid remembrance [of Him],” for “there was no other kind or form under the sun selected by Him which could depict the incarnation,” Christ thus “commanded that the substance of bread be offered which does not yield the shape of a man’s form, so that idolatry may not be introduced indirectly.”

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72 Ibid., 84.
73 Ibid., 91.
74 Ibid., 92.
75 Ibid., 92 – 93.
Innovation had been frowned upon since the earliest days of the Church. Consequently, this innovative attempt by the iconoclasts to create an icon of their own opened a floodgate of criticism from the iconophiles. Indeed, the iconophiles accused the Council of 754 of being “instigators of novelty,” who after deviating from the truth concerning icons, “were led to another apoplectic madness.”⁷⁶ No Apostle or Church Father had ever before called the eucharist an icon of the body of Christ, the iconophiles pointed out. Furthermore, at the last supper Christ himself did not say, “Take, eat the icon of my body,” or “Take, drink the icon of my blood.” Instead, both Jesus and Paul stated very clearly, “This very body,” and “this very blood.” Thus attempting to avoid idolatry, the iconoclasts, according to the Council of 787, had inadvertently added a completely new tradition that merely provided the iconophiles with even more ammunition. In addition to rejecting this ingenious innovation, however, the Council of 787 turned to the theological implications of the icon.

### 7.4.6 Christological Implications of the Icon

After examining the issue of icons at the Council of 754 “with great diligence and deliberation,” the iconoclasts concluded that icon painting was a blasphemy against the most fundamental Christian doctrine of salvation, namely the incarnation of Christ.⁷⁷ However, as the iconophiles pointed out, “great diligence and deliberation” do not necessarily result in truth. In fact, they argued that there can be a diligence that leads to death as Proverbs 14:12 says: “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”⁷⁸ The iconophiles thus concluded that the iconoclasts had fallen

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⁷⁶ Ibid., 94.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁷⁸ RSV.
precisely into this trap. Indeed, building upon the Emperor Constantine V’s expansion of the iconoclastic arguments (see Ch. 6), the Council of 754 claimed that icons were not only deceptive and idolatrous, but even promoters of Christological heresy.

7.4.6.1 Icons Accused of Reviving Nestorianism & Monophysitism

Following Constantine V’s development of an iconoclast theology, the Council of 754 argued that icons revived two ancient heresies: Nestorianism and Monophysitism. Condemned by the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (431 CE), Nestorius had taught that Christ was two different persons, divine and human, instead of a single person, simultaneously God and man. According to the Council of 754, the Nestorian heresy “divided the one son and Word of God, Who for us became man, into a duality of sons.”

Indeed, Constantine V and the Council of 754 argued that because the divine nature of Christ is uncircumscribable, only the humanity of Christ could be depicted. However, to portray only the humanity of Christ would thus fall into the Nestorian heresy by separating the two natures.

In addition to reviving Nestorianism, the iconoclasts argued that icons revived Monophysitism. Indeed, the Council of 754 also argued that any attempt to depict Christ as fully God and fully man would necessarily violate the incomprehensibility and uncircumscribability of Christ’s divinity. According to the iconoclasts, anyone who makes an icon of Christ has not only described the “created flesh” of Christ, but he has also “either circumscribed the uncircumscribable character of the Godhead, according to what has seemed good to his own worthlessness, or he has confused that unconfused union, falling into the iniquity of confusion. Thus, in two ways, with the circumscription

79 Ibid., 77.
and the confusion, he has blasphemed the Godhead.” indeed, the result of such an iconographical effort would result in a mingling of the divine and human natures into one confused nature, and thus a fall into Monophysitism.

7.4.6.1.1 Iconophiles Respond

The iconophiles disagreed wholeheartedly with such claims: “how does he who reproduces with colours the icon of Christ reinstate Nestorius?” the Council of 787 agreed with the iconoclast explanation of the Nestorian heresy, namely that Nestorius taught that God the Word was one person and the Son born of the Virgin another person, thereby dividing the natures of Christ into two, “a man on his own and God on his own.” however, when a painter depicts Christ – the Word become flesh, perfect man perfect God – the iconophiles argued that the painter does not attempt to “reproduce with colours his divinity” since no one has seen God who is “uncircumscribable, invisible, and incomprehensible.” au contraire, the painter of an icon of Christ seeks to “depict the icon of that nature of his according to which he has been seen, not according to which He is invisible; the latter is uncircumscribable.” indeed, because Christ is circumscribable according to his humanity, even though uncircumscribable, invisible, and incomprehensible according to his divinity, and because he is fully human and fully

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80 Ibid., 83.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid., 81.
83 Ibid., 77.
84 Ibid., 84.
divine “without division,” this necessarily means that “the one . . . which is uncircumscribable and the one which can be circumscribed are seen in the one Christ.”

The iconophiles presented their argument against both charges with a simple illustration. Against Nestorianism, they noted that no one looking at an icon of a man thinks that the soul of that man is separated from his image. On the other hand, against Monophysitism, no one looking at the same icon of a man thinks that the indescribable soul has somehow mingled with the image and become confused with the physical dimension of the man. The icon not only fails to portray the soul, but likewise fails to depict the “very substance of the body, . . . flesh, muscles, nerves, bones, and elements, that is blood, phlegm, fluid, and gall, the blending of which it is impossible for one to see in an icon. If these were seen in the icon, we would call this a ‘man,’ and not an ‘icon of man.’” In the same way, the iconophiles continued, when looking at an icon of Peter and Paul, “one can see them. Their souls, however, are not present in the icons.” Even if one were to see Peter in person, they would not see his soul. “Since one cannot see it [the soul], who then of those who adhere to the truth can say – unless in thought only – that the body of Peter is separated from his soul? How, even more, [could one say this] with regard to the uncircumscribable nature of God the Word, which is described by the flesh which was assumed by Him?”

Christians, the iconophiles concluded, know that Christ is two in one and paint him as the Logos who became flesh (Jn 1:14). In icons Christians

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85 Ibid., 77.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., 92.
88 Ibid.
understand nothing except what is signified in them. Thus, when they see in an icon the Virgin giving birth and angels standing around with shepherds, they bring to mind that when God became man He was born for our salvation, and they make a confession, saying ‘He who is without flesh, became flesh. The Word assumed density.’ They also confess that He is one and the same, perfect in divinity, and perfect in humanity, truly God and truly man.\textsuperscript{89}

Indeed, the Church, “by confessing that the union took place without confusion, distinguishes the natures only in thinking without dividing them, confessing Emmanuel is one and the same, even after the union.”\textsuperscript{90} Furthermore, the iconophiles suggested that these accusations of Nestorianism and Monophysitism demonstrated the iconoclasts’ lack of familiarity with the writings of the Fathers, for all the Fathers teach that “the two natures are separated because they are different, not because they are divided.”\textsuperscript{91} As Gregory the Theologian put it, “Whenever the natures are distinguished from one another in our thoughts, the names are also distinguished.”\textsuperscript{92}

\textbf{7.4.7 Persecution to Restoration}

Prior to the rule of Irene, the state of affairs for supporters of icons in Constantinople was quite bleak, particularly for the monks. According to Theophanes, in the year 771 CE Michael Lachanodrakon, the \textit{strategos} of the Thrakesians, sent his notary Leo and a former monk named Leo Koutzodaktylos to sell:

off all the male and female monasteries, all their holy vessels, books, and animals, and all their other possessions and paid their value to the emperor. Whatever books he found containing stories of monks and fathers of the desert he burnt. And whenever it appeared that anyone had a saint’s relic as a phylactery, this, too, was consigned to the fire, while its possessor was punished for impiety. Many monks he killed by scourging, some by the sword, and a numberless multitude he

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 88.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 81.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
blinded. In the case of some he smeared their chins with liquid wax and set fire to them so that their faces and heads were burnt, while others he subjected to many torments and then exiled. All in all, he did not leave in the whole thema that was under his authority a single man wearing the monastic habit.\(^93\)

However, within six years after the fortuitous rise to power of the Empress Irene, her courage and dogged determination to convene an ecumenical council dramatically transformed the imperial policy of Constantinople toward icons. Although the Emperor Constantine V and the Council of 754 certainly purported to uphold the Chalcedonian Christology of the previous Ecumenical Councils, their decrees were completely overturned thirty-three years later. As convoluted and complex as the arguments were, the Council of 787 made it clear that the iconoclasts failed to ensure the ecumenicity of their council, mishandled the sources in their arguments, strayed from the apostolic tradition through an innovative attempt to create their own icon, and completely misunderstood the Christological implications of the icon.

Thus, with arguments ranging from tradition and theology to scriptural and patristic hermeneutics, after one year and seven sessions the delegates of the Seventh Ecumenical Council arrived in Constantinople for the eighth and final session on Oct. 13, 787 CE. After the emperors and all the bishops and abbots had taken their seats in the Magnaura, the ceremonial hall outside the Great Palace of Constantinople, the Definition of the Seventh Ecumenical Council was signed by the Empress Irene and her son Constantine and then read aloud to the citizens and soldiers of the capital. Summarizing the conclusion of the council, Theophanes reports:

And so the catholic Church regained her ancient adornment. The synod introduced no new doctrine, but maintained unshaken the doctrines of the holy and blessed Fathers; it rejected the new heresy and anathematized the three false patriarchs . . . and everyone who shared their views. . . . When they had thus

\(^93\) Theophanes, Chronicle, 615.
confirmed the true religion and the ancient doctrines of the holy Fathers, they rewarded the priests and dismissed them. And so God’s Church found peace. \footnote{Ibid., 636 – 637.}
PART IV – CONTROVERSY CONTINUES

CHAPTER 8

EMPEROR CHARLEMAGNE & MONK THEODORE ABU QURRAH: THE DIVERGENCE OF EAST AND WEST

We do not reject images put up to remind us of great deeds or to beautify churches since we know they were put up thus by Solomon and Moses, although only as type figures, but we object to their adoration which is contrary to custom and indeed more than superstitious; and we cannot find this worship ever to have been instituted by patriarchs or prophets or apostolic men.

Charlemagne

*Libri Carolini*

So it suffices to say Christ our Lord, the heavenly king, will honor anyone who spreads the fame of his icon, and who makes prostration to it. Likewise, he will drive away and dismiss from his kingdom anyone who treats his icon with contempt, and who out of an arrogance of the sort we have mentioned refuses it the act of prostration.

Theodore Abu Qurrah

*A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons*

8.1 Attitudes Toward Art Foreshadow Great Schism

The success of the Empress Irene’s second attempt at an ecumenical council did not magically wipe the iconoclastic slate clean. Indeed, within another twenty-six years the controversy would replay itself all over again and the Christological arguments would be further explored and debated. The question of art’s relationship to religion would not be settled once and for all in the Byzantine Empire until 843 CE during the reign of the Empress Theodora.

During the interlude between the two periods of Byzantine iconoclasm, Eastern and Western attitudes toward art foreshadowed the Great Schism (1054 CE) that would divide Rome and Constantinople 250 years later. Although still somewhat unified by their common faith and heritage of the previous eight centuries, the position taken toward
icons by the East and the West began to diverge by the end of the eighth century. This divergence can be seen most clearly by contrasting the Western perspective of icons in the Frankish Emperor Charlemagne’s *Libri Carolini* with the Eastern view in *A Treatise on the Veneration of Holy Icons* by the Monk Theodore Abu Qurrah.

### 8.2 Iconoclasm Reverberates Faintly in West

Noted *Libri Carolini* scholar Ann Freeman notes that the “great medieval debate on the place of images in the Church, so crucial a controversy in the East, reverberated rather faintly in the West.” Though faint it may have been, the controversy nevertheless did in fact travel across the Bosphorus and make its way into the West. Indeed, from the very beginning of the debate the West found itself involved in the controversy. Pope Gregory II corresponded with Patriarch Germanus when the first Byzantine rumblings against icons reached Rome and Pope Hadrian responded to the Empress Irene’s invitation to an ecumenical council by sending two papal representatives to help overturn the iconoclastic policies of the previous sixty years in the Byzantine Empire. However, it was after the conclusion of the Seventh Ecumenical Council that the issue of icons really took center stage in the West.

#### 8.2.1 Decrees of Seventh Ecumenical Council Create Controversy

Shortly after the eighth and final session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the definition and decrees of the Council reached Pope Hadrian in Rome. The work of translating them from Greek into Latin was immediately initiated. By 789 CE a translation was complete, though poorly performed with major errors that would inevitably lead to many misunderstandings between the East and the West. A copy

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somehow made its way into the hands of Charlemagne who was shocked by what he read.

He immediately responded to the text by ordering the preparation of a document to refute these conciliar decrees. The reply, the *Capitulare adversus synodum (Chapters Against the Synod)*, was sent to Hadrian sometime in 792 CE. Hadrian responded by penning his own reply to Charlemagne’s court the following year in a document titled the *Hadrianum*. Wholeheartedly defending the Council of 787, Pope Hadrian summarized the Frankish arguments and proceeded to refute them point-by-point, just as the Council of 787 had done. While Hadrian hoped to maintain unity and amicable relations with the Franks, Charlemagne was already developing other ideas.

### 8.3 Charlemagne Emerging as “New David”

Charlemagne was already beginning to see himself as the leader of a Christian people. Indeed, by the late 790’s many of the literary figures in his courts were calling him the “New David.” By 800 CE he was being called “most severe,” “orthodox,” and even “basileus,” titles traditionally given to the Byzantine emperor. Furthermore, his spiritual advisor Alcuin began speaking of a “Christian Empire” and addressing Charlemagne in the following way:

> To the King David. It is precisely with this name, inspired by the same virtue and the same faith, that our leader and guide reigns today: a chief in whose shadow the Christian people repose in peace and who on all sides strikes terror into the pagan nations, a chief whose devotion never ceases to fortify the Catholic faith with evangelical firmness against the followers of heresy.\(^2\)

Consequently, Charlemagne came to see himself as a Christian king, a “New David” called by God to humbly lead his people, the “New Israel.” Similar to the Byzantine emperor, Charlemagne felt responsible for maintaining the orthodoxy of his kingdom.

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He thus rejected Hadrian’s defenses and ordered a full-scale investigation into both the Roman and Byzantine positions on the issue of icons.

8.4 Synod of Frankfurt (794 CE)

The culmination of the investigations into the controversies over icons came in 794 CE when Charlemagne both summoned and led the Synod of Frankfurt. The ramifications of this synod were far reaching for it was at this council that the Frankish church began establishing its own autonomy. Indeed, the Libri Carolini condemned the Council of 754, the Council of 787, and Pope Hadrian. The Franks no longer believed that an ecumenical council could be effective since four of the five patriarchal sees (Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria) were in the east while Western Europe seemed to be quickly evolving into a new center of faith. Consequently, the Franks argued that neither Council – 754 or 787 – was ecumenical, partly because these councils were perceived as mere local councils dealing with the local Greek issue of iconoclasm. However, there was a deeper reason for rejecting both councils.

8.4.1 The Middle Way: Rejection of Iconoclasm and Iconophilism

According to the Synod of Frankfurt, neither of the two councils deserved “the title ‘seventh’” because “images only serve to beautify the Churches as well as to recall past events.” Hence, the Synod concluded: “we want neither to prohibit images with one of the councils, nor to worship them with the other; and so we reject the writings of this ridiculous council.”

Indeed, the Libri Carolini argued that the worship of icons – understood from the Latin word adorare which means to worship or pray to instead of the Latin word timare which is closer in meaning to the Greek word proskynesis that

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means to honor or venerate by means of gifts – was not a vital issue for Christians. In comparison to the issue of salvation, icons were totally irrelevant and unimportant. Nevertheless, the Libri Carolini adopted a middle position by rejecting both the iconoclasm of the Council of 754 and the iconophilism of the Council of 787. The Franks were willing to acknowledge a pedagogical value of icons as an aid to faith, but nothing more. Indeed, anything beyond this was considered idolatrous worship of the image, an argument that dated back to Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century.

8.4.2 Pope Gregory the Great’s View of Icons: Didactic Pictures

Pope Gregory the Great had received a disconcerting report that the Bishop of Massilia, Serenus, had destroyed images of saints in his church. However, while Gregory commended the bishop for zealously seeking to prevent the images from being worshiped (adored instead of venerated), he rebuked the bishop for not taking into consideration the usefulness of the images. According to Gregory,

to adore a picture is one thing, but to learn through the story of a picture what is to be adored is another. For what writing presents to the unlearned who behold, since in it even the ignorant see what they ought to follow; in it the illiterate read . . . And then, with regard to the pictorial representations which had been made for the edification of an unlearned people in order that, though ignorant of letters, they might by turning their eyes to the story itself learn what had been done, it must be added that, because thou hadst seen these come to be adored, thou hadst been so moved as to order them to be broken. And it must be said to them, If for this instruction for which images were anciently made you wish to have them in the church, I permit them by all means both to be made and to be had. And explain to them that it was not the sight itself of the story which the picture was hanging to attest that displeased thee, but the adoration which had been

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improperly paid to the pictures. . . . And if any one should wish to make images, by no means prohibit him, but by all means forbid the adoration of images. 

Thus, for Gregory icons were useful for teaching the illiterate, so long as they were not worshipped.

8.4.3 Franks Adopt and Expand Gregory’s Views

The Franks adopted and expanded Gregory’s views toward icons. While Gregory emphasized the didactic value of icons, the Franks also encouraged decorative art simply for aesthetic purposes. Furthermore, though admitting the didactic value of icons for the illiterate, the Franks still emphasized the word over the image. Hence, they demanded that all depicted persons and scenes be identified with the written word.

8.4.4 Icon Veneration Viewed as Idolatrous Worship of Wood

The Franks associated the “worship” of icons in the East with barbarism and paganism. Indeed, for the Franks the icon was made of profane materials – mere wood and paint – and therefore could not possibly be a holy object. They argued that the Eastern justification for venerating icons by the likes of Basil the Great and Athanasius relied upon the pagan tradition of venerating imperial portraits and therefore the practice was to be completely rejected as idolatrous.

The Franks thus fell back on the traditional argument – the Old Testament commandments against idolatry – that had been latent in the Christian Church and persistently appealed to from the first century up until the Synod of Frankfurt. The Libri Carolini makes it clear that the Franks simply did not fully understand the theological implications of the icon that the Councils of 754 and 787 had been debating, partly due to mistranslations, partly due to misunderstandings, and partly due to simple lack of

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information. Nevertheless, there was a monk in the East who, in stark contrast to the Franks, would pick up the mantle of his master and insist upon much more than mere didactic usefulness of icons.

8.5 Monk Theodore Abu Qurrah

A native of Edessa in Syria, Theodore Abu Qurrah (ca. 750 – ca. 820) moved to the Palestinian monastery of St. Sabbas to become a monk. As a result, he was caught up into that rich tradition of Palestinian monasticism that had developed into a “hearth of Chalcedonianism.” Furthermore, whether he ever knew the Monk John Damascene personally or not, he was clearly a student of the Damascene, as demonstrated by the similarities in their arguments for icons. The one main difference, however, was the fact that Theodore took John’s arguments and applied them to his Arabic context; indeed, Theodore wrote his treatise in Arabic and addressed it to people who seemed to be in regular contact and even debate with Muslims.

8.5.1 A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons

According to Theodore’s opening lines, the penning of his treatise was provoked when he received information that many Christians were abandoning the practice of making prostrations before icons of Christ. Shortly thereafter he explains that anti-Christians, which included Muslims and Jews, had been “reprimanding” the Christians for their prostrations, “imputing to them the worship of idols, and the transgression of what God commanded in the Torah and the Prophets.” Thus, the goal for Theodore was

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6 See 6.1.1

to “bring the hearts of those frightened away from prostration to the holy icons back to the practice of prostration to them.”

8.5.1.1 Summary of Arguments

Sidney Griffith summarizes Theodore’s arguments into “five broad strokes.” First, Theodore argues that one cannot dismiss icons by arguing that they “imply the attribution of bodiliness to God”; second, the veneration of icons, though not a written tradition in the Bible, is apostolic in origin and consequently, if one dismisses icons they should dismiss all other unwritten traditions; third, he cites three early patristic references (pseudo-Athanasius, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Gregory the Theologian) to prove an early presence of icons in the Christian tradition; fourth, he spends ten out of twenty-four chapters “explaining how the Christian habit of venerating images does not come under the ban against idols” in the Old Testament; and fifth, he deals with various specific challenges and arguments against venerating icons. For the purpose of contrasting the dramatic way in which the Eastern and Western views toward icons diverged after the Seventh Ecumenical Council, however, emphasis will be placed on Theodore’s explanation of the transmission of veneration from image to prototype.

8.5.1.2 Prostration to Icon of Saint Passes to Saint in Person

Theodore begins by refuting the argument that icons have no contact with those whom they represent. Theodore provides a simple illustration that effectively makes his point. If one were to write the name of a friend of God on a piece of paper, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, or David, and then if an enemy of one of these men were

8 Ibid., 30.
9 Ibid., 24.
to take the paper, spit upon it, trample it underfoot, and dirty it, Theodore asks if such a
person wouldn’t deserve to be punished. However, Theodore notes that the inscribed
names have no actual contact with the men and yet one would still treat the paper with
respect.

Theodore argues that icons are better than writing because they are “simply a
clear writing that anyone can understand, whether he can read” or not and hence “in a
way they are better than writing, because both writing and icons are memorials for the
things to which they point, but in functioning as memorials, the icons are much more
elloquent than writing for their purpose of instructing someone who cannot read.”

Theodore thus concludes that since icons are better than writing they are therefore better
than names. Hence, a prostration of honor – not one of adoration Theodore points out (an
important distinction the Franks missed) – made to icons of saints is made to the saint in
person.

8.5.1.3 Prostration to Icon of Saint Rouses Saint to Pray

Theodore continues his argument by claiming that an intermediary power of
saints can be awakened through prostrations to an icon. Indeed, according to Theodore,
when one honors a saint by making a prostration before his / her icon, the saint will
become a representative “at God’s gate” and will “raise up his prayers, strengthen them,
and ask for their fulfillment from the Lord in his behalf.”

Theodore goes on to note that God has chosen to make saints intermediaries between Himself and those who worship

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11 Ibid., 64.
12 Ibid., 67.
Him, “for the sake of honoring the saints, and for the sake of exciting the interest of others in enjoying with him what they enjoy.””

Theodore goes on to provide examples of saints who served as intermediaries while alive: Moses intercessions calmed God’s anger at the Israelites who were worshipping the calf and as a result God “repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people” (Exod. 32:11 – 14); Abraham begged God to be merciful to Sodom and God was gracious; and God gave Elijah power to open and close the heavens. Thus, according to Theodore, God withholds “his mercy from his servants until his friends would elicit it from him for them, as if he were making praise for his loved ones as much of a requirement as it is for himself, and even more!”

However, God does not only do this during the lifetime of his friends, “but even after their demise he makes people’s honor for them to continue to the point that it is through them they gain access to him,” including, for example, deeds accomplished because of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Jerusalem being saved on David’s account. Theodore concludes by comparing this process to an entourage of earthly kings: does one not give “honor to his companions, his doorkeepers, his ministers, and the people of preference in his entourage? These people act as one’s proxies at the king’s door, securing one’s need for him, in his absence or in his presence.”

8.5.1.4 Joy or Disdain Given to Icon of Christ Repaid

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13 Ibid.
14 RSV.
15 Ibid., 68.
16 Ibid., 69.
Theodore provides one final illustration to demonstrate that one will be treated the same way one treats an icon of Christ. If a mother of a king was defamed among the common people because of a tramp, and if the people could recognize the face of both the mother and the tramp, and then someone decided to paint an icon of the king’s mother engaged in sexual intercourse with the tramp and proceeded to march it around town for the public to see, would not the king react in anger? If the painter of the icon argued before the king that he had done nothing to the king’s mother, but only something with a panel and paints, the king would probably become even angrier at the painter’s arrogance. Theodore thus concludes that “Christ our Lord, the heavenly king, will honor anyone who spreads the fame of his icon, and who makes prostration to it. Likewise, he will drive away and dismiss from his kingdom anyone who treats his icon with contempt, and who out of an arrogance of the sort we have mentioned refuses it the act of prostration.”

8.6 Conclusion

Charlemagne’s *Libri Carolini* and Theodore Abu Qurrah’s *A Treatise on the Veneration of Icons* effectively demonstrate the differences that had developed between Eastern and Western views of art. While the East and the West had both long embraced icons as a means of communicating the gospel message, by the end of the eighth century they had set out on divergent paths. Although the reverberations of the iconoclastic controversy had certainly been felt in the West, particularly by the Franks, the depth of devotion to icons in the East never quite made sense to the Romans and the Franks. Indeed, the Byzantines had embraced icons not only as a means of communicating the

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17 Ibid., 92.
gospel, but also as holy objects that served as connecting points between the spiritual and the material, between heaven and earth, between God and man. Furthermore, following centuries of struggle to understand and articulate the nature and person of Christ, the Byzantines could not help but view the icon as intimately linked to the incarnation.
CONCLUSION

*If you will only step inside, the things . . . will suddenly reveal their real and transcendental nature.*

C.S. Lewis

Innumerable attempts have been made to explain the violent eruption of the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy. Scholars have suggested military defeats, volcanoes, religious reform, cultural clashes, conflicts of religion, heresies, and the role of the holy as causes for the controversy. Most of them, however, have focused on a monocausal explanation and the historical reality is far too complex to support such a simple view. Nevertheless, each of the theories promulgated has in its own way shed an angle of light on the question at hand. Consequently, by combining this array of angles into one luminous beam, a far more brilliant picture can emerge that comes much closer to portraying the historical reality.

Despite the clarity that a unified and thus magnified beam of light can illumine, an outside view still poses its limitations. However, a step into this beam of light might balance out the picture. As Lewis has so effectively illustrated, looking along a beam of light provides a completely different perspective than looking at a beam of light. Indeed, an inside view has the potential of revealing the “real and transcendental nature” of the object of inquiry. Hence, an inside perspective has been attempted by focusing on the doctrinal dimensions of the debate over icons, particularly as articulated by the pivotal individuals. Hopefully, this thesis has portrayed a more accurate picture of the controversy.
Defense lagged behind attack, as attack had lagged behind practice.
Ernst Kitzinger

The evolution of Christian art traveled an arduous and conflict-ridden path. With the conversion of Constantine near the beginning of the fourth century, however, it was able to successfully ascend out of the second- and third-century catacombs. Evidence clearly exists for the emergence of icons by the middle of the fourth century and by the sixth century, following the rebuilding of the Hagia Sophia under Emperor Justinian I, the icon began to invade every dimension of daily Byzantine life. Indeed, devotion to icons had become a widespread and established practice by the sixth century in the Byzantine Empire.

However, as this practice of venerating icons developed, it inevitably provoked attacks. While there had already been an early reluctance to portray Christ in the second- and third-century catacombs, by the beginning of the fourth century, an official conciliar decree was made in Spain prohibiting the painting of images on church walls (i.e. Canon 36 of the Council of Elvira in 305 CE). By the middle of the fourth century, Eusebius articulated one of the first theological arguments against icons in his refusal to send an icon of Christ to the Emperor Constantine’s sister. Following another three centuries of scattered and isolated incidents of resistance to icons, Emperor Leo III issued the first imperial iconoclast decree in 730 CE. Shortly thereafter, his son Emperor Constantine V further developed the Christological arguments of Eusebius and convened a council in 754 CE to officially condemn icons (i.e. Council of Hiereia). The debate over the relationship between art and religion had indeed provoked a “continual conflict.”

While practice had provoked attack, these attacks inevitably provoked a defense, particularly as the attacks intensified. Hence, as the devotion to icons increasingly intensified during the sixth and seventh centuries, the first official defense for icons was
promulgated near the end of the seventh century. The 82\textsuperscript{nd} canon of the Council of Trullo (692 CE) linked the incarnation to icons by decreeing the portrayal of the humanity of Christ and by prohibiting a symbolic depiction of him as a shepherd. The following century Patriarch Germanus developed this idea in a series of letters penned in the 720’s CE as a response to iconoclast bishops in Western Asia Minor. In addition to echoing the initial Christological foundation of the icon articulated by Canon 82, Germanus emphasized the importance of the intent of the veneration given to icons (i.e. honor passed to the person represented, not to the wood and paint itself) and the danger of attempting to portray the divinity of Christ. Shortly thereafter, Monk John Damascene continued the arguments of Patriarch Germanus and developed the iconophile defense even further by explaining the important distinction between praise (\textit{latreia}) and veneration (\textit{proskynesis}) and by articulating a theology of the image which claimed a central role for icons in Christian theology. Consequently, by the end of the eighth century, the Christian Church had thus developed and articulated a sufficient defense for icons and was ready to solidify its arguments through an ecumenical council. Indeed, by 787 CE the Empress Irene successfully convened the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which not only overturned the iconoclast council of Hiereia (754 CE), but finally decreed an official ecclesiastical and ecumenical position on the role icons should play in the Christian Church.
Ever since the dawn of history . . . [man] has had to face one fundamental question: is art the ally of religion, or its most insidious enemy?

John Julius Norwich

The relationship between art and religion has always been tenuous. The debate essentially boils down to one key question: Is art an ally or enemy of religion? Attempts to answer this question have resulted in both negative and affirmative answers; sometimes the passion involved in such attempts have even led to violence, as did the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy. Indeed, the culmination of seven centuries of unresolved conflict over Christianity’s official answer to this question, in conjunction with a whole range of factors that converged in the seventh and eighth centuries (explored in chapter four), ultimately led to a violent outbreak of opposition to icons in the eighth and ninth centuries.

With the Definition and decrees of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, however, the Christian Church finally had an established answer standing ready to lead the way in defending any further attacks. Indeed, despite a temporary restoration of icons following the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the iconoclastic controversy would repeat itself between the years 813 and 843 CE. Curiously, a monk, a patriarch, and an empress would once again effectively defend the icon and ultimately end the Byzantine controversy. Indeed, the first Sunday of Lent in 843 CE was declared the Triumph of Orthodoxy by the Empress Theodora and every year thereafter the Orthodox Church has celebrated the triumph of icons as defenders of the incarnation and as an integral component of the Christian tradition. Despite this Byzantine “triumph,” however, controversy over the relationship between art and religion continues unabated to this day. Hence, the arguments articulated in the Empress Irene’s Seventh Ecumenical Council,
which relied upon those of the Patriarch Germanus and the Monk John Damascene, should continue to guide the ongoing debate, even into the twenty-first century.
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

RECENT LITERATURE ON ART & RELIGION


APPENDIX B

FLORILEGIUM GERMANI:
LITERARY FLOWERS BY PATRIARCH GERMANUS

“One ought to look not only at what is done, but also at the intention.”

“When we look on an icon of a saint – and this is true for every icon of a saint – we venerate not the panel or the paint but the pious and visible figure.”

“In eternal memory of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, of His passion, of His saving death, and the salvation of the world that they bring about, we have received the tradition of portraying Him in His human form, in His visible theophany, understanding that in this way we exalt the humiliation of God the Word.”

“We allow icons to be fashioned and painted with wax and colors, not in order to pervert the perfection of our liturgy. Of the invisible deity we make neither likeness nor any other form. For even the supreme choirs of the holy angels do not fully know or fathom God. But then the only-begotten Son, who dwells in the bosom of the Father, desiring to free his own creature from the sentence of death, mercifully deigned, according to the Father’s and the Holy Spirit’s counsel, to become man. He took on our own flesh and blood, one like us yet without sin, as the great Apostle says. For this reason we depict his human likeness in an image, the way he looked as man and in the flesh, and not as he is in his ineffable and invisible divinity. For we have that urge to depict what pertains to our Faith, namely, the truth that Christ became man not merely in appearance and impression . . . but in reality and truth, and complete in everything except sin, which the enemy has planted in us. In conformity with this firm belief, we depict the likeness of his holy flesh in our icons, which we esteem and honor through appropriate reverence, for they remind us of his life-giving and ineffable Incarnation.”

“If, indeed, it can be shown that pious notions of the divine have been exchanged for those that are more carnal, or the glory and adoration that are due God have been left behind or in any way diminished, then, clearly, it would be right to remove that which has engrossed us or drawn us away from our reverence for and attendance on the one true God.”

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2 Trans. by Edmund Jephcott in Belting, Likeness and Presence, 503.

3 Germanus, De Haeresibus et Synodis, PG 98:80A, my translation.


5 Trans. by Charles Barber in Barber, Figure and Likeness, 57.
APPENDIX C

FLORILEGIUM PATRI:
LITERARY FLOWERS BY THE CHURCH FATHERS

Athanasius the Great (295 – 373 CE):
“Therefore he who venerates the icon venerates the emperor represented in it.”

Basil the Great (330 – 379 CE):
“For the icon of the emperor is also called emperor but there are not two emperors; for neither is the power divided nor is the glory partitioned . . . for the honour rendered to the icon passes over to the prototype.”

Gregory of Nyssa (330 – 395 CE):
“He who looks at an icon made by craftsmanship through the use of colours does not let his gaze dwell on the colours of the panel but looks to the form alone which the draftsman has displayed through the use of colours.”

Epiphanius of Cyprus (315 – 403 CE):
“For the emperors are not two emperors through having an icon but are one emperor with his icon.”

Cyril of Alexandria (390 – 444 CE):
“If any one of us desired to see the story of Abraham (the sacrifice of Isaac) painted on a panel, how would the painter draw it? Would he draw the events in one scene, or would he draw them separately and differently, that is to say, in a series of different scenes? . . . But it is not a different Abraham that is seen in different attitudes in different parts of the picture, but the same Abraham everywhere, the skill of the painter always accommodating the demands of the real course of events.”

St Neilus (fl. 430 CE):

1 Ambrosios Giakalis provides a florilegium of chief patristic witnesses in support of icons along with additional commentary in *Images of the Divine*, 35 – 42. The following passages are translated by and excerpted from Giakalis.

2 PG 26: 332B; Giakalis, 35.
3 PG 32: 149C; Giakalis, 35 – 36.
4 PG 44: 776A; Giakalis, 36.
5 Mansi 12: 1967D; Giakalis, 36.
“In the sanctuary on the east wall of the divine precinct mark only a single cross. . . . by the hand of an excellent painter fill the nave of the saints on every side with narrative scenes from the Old and New Testaments, so that those who are illiterate and cannot read the sacred Scriptures might through looking at the pictures be instructed in the noble deeds of those who have truly served God and might be stirred up to rival their celebrated and famous achievements, through which they exchanged earth for heaven, having preferred what is invisible to what is visible.”

Anastasius I (540 – 599 CE):
“When the emperor is absent, his icon is venerated in the place of his person. But when he is present, it is absurd to abandon the prototype in order to venerate the image. When it is not venerated because of the presence of him on whose account its veneration takes place, however, it should by no means be dishonoured. . . . when someone insults the icon of the emperor, he receives a just punishment exactly as if he had dishonoured the emperor himself. . . . Similarly, if someone dishonours the type of a person, the insult is conveyed to the person himself of whom it is the type.”

John of Thessalonica (7th cent. CE):
“We make icons of mortal men, of the holy and embodied servants of God, in order to commemorate them and honour them and we do nothing unreasonable in painting them as they were in life. For we do not express ourselves in art, as you [Greeks] do, nor do we show bodily characteristics of incorporeal beings. And when we venerate them, we do not venerate the icons, as you yourself have said, but we glorify the personages represented pictorially, and then not as gods – God forbid – but as true servants and friends of God who have the ability to intercede for us. We also make icons of God – I mean of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ – but we paint him as he was seen on earth and lived amongst men, not as he is conceived of in his nature as God. For what likeness or what form is there of the incorporeal and formless Logos of the Father? For God is spirit, as Scripture says. That is to say, the holy nature of the consubstantial Trinity is spirit. But since God the Father willed it and his only-begotten divine Logos came down from heaven and was made incarnate for our salvation by the Holy Spirit and the spotless Virgin and Theotokos, Mary, we depict his humanity not his incorporeal divinity.”

Jerome, priest of Jerusalem (7th – 8th cent. CE):
“And just as God allowed every nation to venerate things made by human hands and was pleased to let the Jews venerate the tables which Moses had hewn and the two golden cherubim, so too he granted to us Christians to paint and venerate the cross and the icons of noble deeds and to manifest our work.”

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7 PG 79: 580; Giakalis, 40.
8 PG 89:1405; Giakalis, 40.
9 Mansi 13: 164C – 165C; Giakalis, 41.
10 PG 40: 865CD; Giakalis, 41.
Stephen of Bozra (7th – 8th cent. CE):
“We have made the icons of the saints as a memorial of the saints, such as Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and Elijah and Zachariah and the rest of the prophets and holy martyrs who have been put to death for him, so that everyone who beholds their icons should commemorate them and glorify him who glorified them. Concerning icons, we have confidence that every work executed in the name of God is good and holy. But concerning idols and statues, away with them. For they are evil and perverse, both they and their makers. For an icon of a holy prophet is one thing but a statue or effigy of Kronos or Aphrodite or Helios or Selene is another. For since man was made in the image of God, he may be venerated. But since a serpent is an image of the devil, it is unclean and to be rejected. If you reject what has been made by human hands, tell me, O Jew, what is there on earth that is venerated which was not made by human hands? And what of the sanctuary and the mercy seat and the cherubim and the golden jar which contained the manna and the inner tent and everything that was called by God holy of holies? Were not the cherubim, the icons of angels, made by human hands? What do you say? If you call these things idols, what do you say to their veneration by Moses and Israel? Veneration is a symbol of honour. When we sinners venerate, we glorify God with divine worship and worthy veneration and fear him as our maker and provider, but we glorify the angels and servants of God in accordance with the honour of God as creatures of God and his servants. For an icon is a name and a likeness of the person represented in it. Therefore we always commemorate with letters and engravings the passions of the Lord and the holy prophets which are recounted in the law and the gospels.”

11 PG 94: 1376; Giakalis, 37 – 38.
APPENDIX D

DEFINITION OF THE SEVENTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL (787 CE)

The holy, great and Ecumenical Council – convened by the grace of God and by the sanction of our pious kings, those lovers of Christ, Constantine and his mother Irene, for a second time in the magnificent capital of the Nicaeans of the province of the Bithynians, and in the holy church of God which is named after Wisdom – having followed the tradition of the catholic Church, has DEFINED the following:

Christ our God, Who granted to us the light of His knowledge and Who delivered us from the darkness of the insanity of the idols, after He betrothed His holy catholic Church, which is without spot or wrinkle, commanded that she may be so preserved. He also gave assurances to his holy disciples, saying: I am with you always, to the close of the age. He gave this commandment not only to his disciples but also to us who through them have believed in his name.

However, some men, paying no regard to this gift, and encouraged by the deceitful enemy, deviated from right thinking and, after opposing the tradition of the catholic Church, erred in the perception of truth. As the word of the Proverbs says, they caused the axles of their own husbandry to go astray and . . . they gathered barreness with their hands; for even though they are called priests – without being so – they dared to discredit the decency which dedicated items have, [a decency] proper to God. It is for them that God cries out through the words of the prophecy: Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard and they defiled my portion. For, having followed men of impiety who put faith in their own minds, they have accused the holy Church, which has been joined to Christ the God, and they have made no distinction between the holy and the profane, calling the icon of the Lord and those of his saints with the same name as the wooden symbols of the idols of Satan.

For this reason God the sovereign One, not bearing to see his people destroyed by such a pestilence, through his good will brought us, the leaders of the priesthood, together from all parts through the divine zeal and inspiration of Constantine and Irene, our most faithful Kings, so that the divine tradition of the catholic Church may regain its authority by a common vote. Having, therefore, sought most diligently and conferred with each other, and having set as our goal the truth, we neither delete nor add anything, but preserve undiminished everything that is of the catholic Church. Adhering also to the six holy Ecumenical Councils first that which convened in the magnificent capital of the Nicaeans, and also that which convened after this in the Royal City guarded by God,

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1 Trans. by Sahas in Sahas, Icon and Logos, 176 – 185.
2 Eph. 5:27
3 Matt. 28:20
4 Cf. Prov. 9:12
5 Jer. 12:10
WE BELIEVE in one God, Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; light of light, true God from a true God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things were made; Who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnated by the holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became man: He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried, and He rose on the third day according to the Scriptures; and He ascended into heaven, where He sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, whose Kingdom shall have no end.

And in the holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified; who spoke through the prophets.

And in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.
I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;
I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come. Amen.

However, we despise and anathematize Arius and those of the same opinion with him who share in his insane disbelief; as well as Macedonius and his adherents, who have rightly been called ‘Offenders of the Spirit.’ We acknowledge our Lady, the holy Mary, to be properly and truly Theotokos, for having given birth, as far as the flesh is concerned, to Christ our God Who is one of the holy Trinity, as it has been taught before by the Council in Ephesus, which expelled from the Church Nestorius, the impious one, and his adherents for introducing a duality of persons. In addition to these we acknowledge the two natures of Him Who for us became incarnate from the immaculate Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, knowing Him to be perfect God and perfect man, as the Council in Chalcedon declared, which expelled from the holy court Eutyches and Dioscorus, who had taught blasphemies. With them we subject [to anathema] Severus, Peter, and those in the same line who are interwoven with them, who have repeatedly pronounced blasphemies. Along with them we anathematize the myths of Origen, Evagrius, and Didymus, as the Fifth Council did, which convened in Constantinople. Afterwards we, too, proclaim the two wills and energies in Christ, according to the quality of each nature, just as the Sixth Council in Constantinople pronounced, when it renounce Sergius, Honorius, Cyrus, Pyrrus, and Macarius, who did not like piety, as well as the ones of the same mind with them.

In summary, we preserve all the traditions of the Church, which for our sake have been decreed in written or unwritten form, without introducing an innovation. One of these traditions is the making of iconographic representations – being in accordance with the narrative of the proclamation of the gospel – for the purpose of ascertaining the incarnation of God the Word, which was real, not imaginary, and for being of an equal benefit to us as the gospel narrative. For those which point mutually to each other undoubtedly mutually signify each other.

Be this as it may, and continuing along the royal pathway, following both the teaching of our holy Fathers which is inspired by God and the tradition of the catholic Church – for we know that this tradition is of the holy Spirit dwelling in her – in absolute precision and harmony with the spirit, WE DECLARE that, next to the sign of the precious and life-giving cross, venerable and holy icons – made of colours, pebbles, or any other material that is fit – may be set in the holy churches of God, on holy utensils
and vestments, on walls and boards, in houses and in streets. These may be icons of our Lord and God the Saviour Jesus Christ, or of our pure Lady the holy Theotokos, or of honourable angels, or of any saint or holy man. For the more these are kept in view through their iconographic representation, the more those look at them are lifted up to remember and have an earnest desire for the prototypes. Also [we declare] that one may render to them the veneration of honour: not the true worship of our faith, which is due only to the divine nature, but the same kind of veneration as is offered to the form of the precious and life-giving cross, to the holy gospels, and to the other holy dedicated items. Also [we declare] that one may honour these by bringing to them incense and light, as was the pious custom of the early [Christians]; for ‘the honour to the icon is conveyed to the prototype.’ Thus, he who venerates the icon venerates the hypostasis of the person depicted on it. In this way the teaching of our holy Fathers – that is, the tradition of the catholic Church, which has accepted the gospel from one end of the earth to the other – is strengthened. Thus, we faithfully follow Paul, who spoke in Christ, as well as the entire divine assembly of the Apostles and Fathers, holding the traditions which we have received.7 Using the words of the prophet we repeat loudly to the Church the hymns of victory: Rejoice, O daughter of Zion: cry aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem; rejoice and delight thyself with all thine heart. The Lord has taken away from thee the iniquities of thine opponents, he has ransomed thee from the land of thine enemies: the Lord, the King is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more, and peace will be unto thee for ever.8

Hence those who take the liberty of thinking or teaching otherwise, or – like the accursed heretics – of violating the traditions of the Church and inventing some sort of novelty, or of rejecting some of the things which have been dedicated to the Church – that is the gospel, or the form of the cross, or an iconographic representation, or a holy relic of a martyr – or of contriving crookedly and cunningly to upset any of the legitimate traditions of the catholic Church, or of using the holy treasures or the venerable monasteries as a common place, if they are bishops or clergymen, WE DIRECT that they be unfrocked; if monks or laymen of the society, that they be excommunicated.

I, Peter, unworthy protopresbyter of the throne of the holy Apostolic Peter, being in the place of Pope Hadrian of the senior Rome and having so defined, have signed.

I, Peter, unworthy presbyter and abbot [of the monastery] of our holy Father Sabbas, being in the place of Pope Hadrian of the senior Rome and having so defined, have signed.

I, Tarasius, by the grace of God bishop of Constantinople, the new Rome, following the doctrines of the Fathers and the tradition of the catholic Church, having so defined, have signed.

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6 Basil, On the Holy Spirit, PG 32:149C.

7 Cf. 2 Thes. 2:15 3:6.

I, John, by the grace of God presbyter and patriarchal secretary, attending for the three apostolic thrones of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, following the doctrines of the Fathers and the tradition of the catholic Church, having so defined, have signed.

I, Thomas, by the grace of God presbyter and abbot of the monastery of our holy Father Arsenius in Egypt, upper Babylon, attending for the three apostolic thrones of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, following the doctrines of the Fathers and the tradition of the catholic Church, having so defined, have signed.

I, Agapius, unworthy bishop of Caesarea, following the doctrines of the Fathers and the tradition of the catholic Church, having so defined, have signed.

I, John, unworthy bishop of Ephesus, following the doctrines of the Fathers and the tradition of the catholic Church, having so defined, have signed.

I, Constantine, by the grace of God bishop of the island of the Cypriots, following the doctrines of the Fathers and the tradition of the catholic Church, having so defined, have signed.  

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9 Ibid., 176 – 181; all 301 participants who signed the Definition made the same declaration as those listed; for a list of all participants, see Sahas, 181 – 85.
APPENDIX E

ON THE MARTYRDOM OF ST EUPHEMIA

There was a divine woman, an undefiled virgin, who dedicated her prudence to God. Her name is Euphemia. During a time when a tyrant was persecuting those who were pious, she preferred most readily the venture of death. Thus the citizens, as well as those who share with her in the religion for which she died, having admired the virgin for being both brave and saintly, placed her coffin in a sepulcher near the church and they now offer honours to her, and all together hold an annual celebration. During such celebrations the priests of the mysteries of God always honour her memory with words, and they diligently preach to those who come together how she carried through the struggle of endurance. The painter also, expressing his own piety through art, has, in so far as he has been able, designed on a canvas the entire story which he has placed by the sepulcher as a holy spectacle. This is what is on this piece of art: high on a throne sits a judge looking at the virgin with a bitter and adverse look. When it wants, art shows anger even with inanimate material. Surrounding the authorities are many soldiers. Two of them charged with keeping the minutes are holding writing-tablets and styluses. Each of them, with a hand raised from the waxen tablet, is looking intently at the accused, with his face turned all the way, as if he is demanding that she speak louder, lest by not hearing well he may write wrong things for which he may be held liable. The virgin is standing, wearing a fair gown and an outer garment – which according to the painter signifies philosophy – with a refined appearance, which to me symbolizes the soul decorated with virtues. Two soldiers are escorting her to the ruler, the one pulling her forward and the other following behind her, the disposition of the virgin being a mixture of modesty and firmness. For she is turning her face down towards the ground as if she is blushing at the sight of men. Yet she stands undaunted without losing courage for the battle. When I saw the drama of the Colchian woman, I praised those painters of the past. When that woman was about to strike with the sword against her children, [the painter made] her face show both mercy and anger. One of the eyes showed anger, while the other disclosed the mother who was merciful and horrified. Now I have transferred admiration for that feeling to this painting. I admire the artist immensely, because he has made a better combination of colours, as he has combined together modesty and bravery – dispositions which are by nature contrary to each other. As she proceeds towards the imitation [=martyrdom: considered by early Christians as ultimate imitation of Christ], some public executioners, barely dressed in their short shifts, are already beginning with their work. One, seizing and bending her head, turns the face of the virgin so that the other may easily proceed with the punishment. The other one, standing, is pulling out her teeth. It looks as if the instruments of punishment were a hammer and a gimlet. From this point on, however, I am in tears, and the suffering cuts my speech short. The painter has made the drops of blood so real that you think they are indeed being shed from her lips, and you would like to go away and cry. Then follows the prison. Again the virgin, modest, in her light clothes, is sitting alone stretching both her hands towards the sky and calling God to be

an ally in her hardships. While she is praying, there appears over her head the sign which is customary for the Christians to bow to and with which they sign themselves. I take this to symbolize the suffering which she gladly accepted. Soon afterwards the painter set up in another place an intense fire, with a bright red colour, aflame on both sides, thus giving to the flame the shape of a body. In the middle it is she standing, with hands stretched open to the sky, while no distress shows in her face. On the contrary, she is joyful, because she is departing to the incorporeal and blessed life. The painter has stopped his hand at this point; so have I my speech. But it is time for you now, if you wish, to complete the narrative, so that you may comprehend it precisely – lest we stop very short of its meaning.