



Windows into Heaven: The Role of Icons in the Greek Orthodox Church

JOHN KOSTAS

He is the *icon* of the invisible God...
—Col 1:15

EARLY CONTROVERSY

One day in the year 726, in the city of Constantinople, a sullen crowd gathered outside the Chalke Gate, the principal entranceway to the imperial palace near Hagia Sophia. All eyes were focused on the enormous golden icon of Christ that stood over the gate, which the emperor had ordered dismantled. Suddenly, a group of pious women set upon the officer in charge of the demolition and killed him—the first martyr in the 117-year battle over the role of sacred images in the Greek Orthodox Church.

The controversy was launched by Emperor Leo III, a Syrian peasant soldier who rose to power in 717 on the strength of his staunch resistance to Arab invasions into the empire. To Leo, the reverence for holy images had grown superstitiously into idolatry, and he planned to put a stop to it through a systematic campaign of iconoclasm. The conflict reached its peak under Leo's son Constantine V Copronymus (741–775), who called a council at the Palace of Hiera in 754.

Icons have been described as “dogma in paint” and “windows into heaven.” They are witnesses to the incarnation, God’s own icon, which declares that the divine Logos has become capable of human depiction.

Constantine V claimed that those who favored the display of likenesses of Christ were on the horns of a theological dilemma. The Fourth Ecumenical Council, held in Chalcedon in 451, resolved the raging ecclesiastical controversy over Christology by holding Jesus Christ to be one person in two natures, perfect in Godhood and in manhood, the two natures being known “without confusion, change, division or separation.” A devotee of holy images was seen as either seeking to depict Christ’s human nature as separate from the divine, which made him a Nestorian, or was confusing the two, which meant he was a Monophysite. There was simply no way short of heresy to depict Christ’s divine glory, even in his humanity.

This parsing of the Chalcedonian definition was a typical piece of Byzantine theologizing, backed up with the strong arm of the imperium. The emperor followed the council’s decree with the disposition, mutilation, and death of countless iconophiles, including the revered iconophile martyr St. Stephen the Younger of Constantinople (713–765). The military was likewise solidly iconoclastic; it was not lost on the superstitious soldiery that emperors who opposed icons did better in the field against the Arabs and the Bulgarians, surely a sign of divine approbation.

Moreover, iconoclasm was a part of the eighth-century zeitgeist. Christians from Syria, Armenia, and other parts of the Byzantine East did not share in the Greco-Roman taste for religious imagery. More important, the empire was in a brutal military and ideological confrontation with Islam, which many felt could best be faced with a puritan movement against pagan-influenced art. Art historian Robin Cormack writes:

The period around 730 marks a significant time in the history of art, when all three religions that held in common the Old Testament declared that obedience to the second commandment meant that henceforth there could be no figurative images in synagogue, mosque or Church.¹

It was the indomitable Empress Irene who ultimately brought about the restoration of icons. Irene dominated first her consort, Constantine’s son, Leo IV, during his reign (775–780), then her own son, Constantine VI (781–797), before conspiring in her own child’s ghastly blinding and murder and seizing the throne herself (797–802). Her devious cruelty and insatiable lust for power would ultimately cost the Byzantine Empire a great deal in its growing rivalry with Charlemagne’s revived West. Yet the Empress was as pious as she was fierce. In 787, she called together the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which adopted the theological reasoning of John of Damascus (675–749). In his *Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, the Damascene made a crucial distinction: while icons are not worthy of the true worship of faith (*latreia*), they deserve honorable veneration (*proskynesis*). The honor paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, its prototype. The Council declared:

For by so much more frequently as they [i.e., Christ, his mother, the angels,

¹Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 91.

and the saints] are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honorable reverence [*proskynesis*], not indeed that true worship of faith [*latreia*] which pertains alone to the divine nature.²

There was a twenty-eight-year renewal of iconoclasm following an edict under Emperor Leo V the Armenian in 815. This in turn was ultimately subdued in 854 under another woman, Theodora, the widow of the emperor Theophilus, with the help of the *Three Refutations of the Iconoclasts* by Theodore the Studite (759–826), a major force in the codification of monastic practices in the Byzantine East. The artistic destruction had been enormous, but the issue was settled once and for all; the decree of the Seventh Ecumenical Council is still rehearsed in the Orthodox Church worldwide on the first Sunday of Lent, the Sunday of Orthodoxy. Byzantium had, in the words of historian E. J. Martin, “completed the process of identifying Christianity with Greco-Latin civilization.”³

WINDOWS INTO HEAVEN

Byzantine holy icons can thus be viewed as the artistic outworking of religious controversy, “dogma in paint.” Yet icons are much more.

In the strictest sense, icons are religious images painted on wood panel, usually in egg tempera. More often, however, the term denotes sacred images of a particular style found in a wide array of media—painted in illuminated manuscripts, etched on reliquaries, carved in ivory, or, most majestically, displayed in mosaics and frescoes on the walls of churches and monasteries. In any case, the sacred images of Byzantium are among the most solemn and sublime expressions of religious art in the world. Their timeless and unearthly quality reflects their religious function as “windows into heaven.”

Visitors today to the lands of the former Byzantine East are fortunate to find accessible outstanding icons from all periods of Byzantine and Ottoman rule, both in museums and *in situ* in churches and monasteries. Here we can cite only a few examples of this unparalleled richness.

The emperor Justinian (reigned 527–565) undertook a massive building program, both secular and ecclesiastical, during the last great flowering of the late Roman Empire. His bequests include the Great Church, Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, with its mosaics from various periods up until the city’s fall in 1453. These include a colossal mosaic of the Virgin Mary and Christ child in the apse, dedicated by the Patriarch Photios in 867 as the cathedral’s first mosaic in the wake of iconoclasm. Also notable are mosaics in the Church of San Vitale in the restored Western

²Henry Percival, *The Seven Councils of the Undivided Church*, vol. 14 of *Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995) 550.

³Edward J. Martin, *The History of the Iconoclastic Controversy* (London: SPCA, 1930), as quoted in John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries* (New York: Knopf, 1981) 371.

imperial capital in Ravenna, Italy, and the treasures of St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai, built between 548 and 565. In Thessaloniki in northern Greece, one can still visit the Church of Hosios David, with a unique mosaic of the prophets Ezekiel and Habakkuk beholding a vision of Christ seated on a rainbow.

During the middle Byzantine period, that is, from 780 to the fall of Constantinople to the Latin crusaders in 1204, there were major artistic renewals under the Macedonian emperors (866–1025) and under the Komnenian dynasty in the late twelfth century. From this latter period, we have in Greece alone three monastery *katholika* (chapels) with mosaic décor of impressive richness: Nea Moni, on the island of Chios; Daphni, outside Athens; and Ossiou Loukos, near the site of the ancient Greek sanctuary at Delphi, whose mosaics are so embellished with gold leaf that they seem to shimmer and glow in candlelight.

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Finally, representing the waning centuries of the empire (1204–1453), we can cite the Church of St. Savior in Chora, built on the outskirts of Constantinople in 1316–1321 by the wealthy benefactor Theodore Metochites to serve as the supreme monument of the Paleologian renaissance inaugurated in 1261, when the imperial city was returned to Byzantine rule. The breathtaking mosaics in the narthex feature extensive cycles of the life of the Mother of God and the infancy of Christ, taken from the second-century apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James*. But the indisputable highlight is the icon of the *anastasis*, or resurrection, in the *parekklesion* (side chapel), which dynamically depicts the triumphant Christ raising up Adam and Eve from hell. The naturalistic modeling and human treatment of the figures here—as well as in the large mosaic panel of the Deisis in Hagia Sophia (depicting Christ flanked by his mother and John the Baptist, beseeching him in prayer)—are evidence of a convergence with the style of early Italian Renaissance painters like Giotto. Yet Byzantine sacred art retained its distinctive characteristics; the intellectual Metochites was no Petrarch, and Constantinople was by no means a center of humanism as were the Italian city-states.

Icons are not primarily designed to be naturalistic portraits, but there are those from different periods that do display a more naturalistic style with more narrative details, under the influence of classical antiquity or later Western realism. In general, however, icons convey their subject matter and their spiritual import through stock motifs, images, and expressive devices developed through long centuries of tradition.

THE ARRANGEMENT OF ICONS

By the twelfth century, after generations of gradual evolution in worship and

piety under the influence of monasticism, icons were being arranged in Orthodox churches in a fairly standardized program. Typically, a Christ *Pantokrator* (Almighty) adorns the dome, with four evangelists on the dome's piers. In the conch of the apse is usually found the *Platytera*, the Mother of God "more spacious than the heavens," arms outstretched and the Christ child in her womb.

By this period, also, the *iconostasis* (templon or icon screen) had evolved from a chancel railing to a formidable wall separating the altar from the nave. This in turn increased the need for icons, again in a standard arrangement: The Mystical (or Last) Supper is often seen above the royal doors, the center entrance to the holy sanctuary. These doors in turn are flanked with depictions of Christ—as a child with his mother on the left (as one faces the icon screen), and as enthroned judge on the right. Flanking the latter is St. John the Baptist, while to the left of the mother and child appears the saint or dominical feast to which the church is dedicated. The side doors feature the archangels Michael and Gabriel.

On the right side of the nave, near the front, the crucifixion is depicted, and the left, the resurrection. Beyond this, icon programs can become very elaborate and display considerable variation in response to local customs and concerns. Many churches display images of saints and narrative scenes from the earthly ministry of Christ arranged in horizontal zones or registers. There are icons displayed in the narthex in concert with the ecclesiastical calendar of festivals and saints' days. There are also icons displayed in special shrines and *proskynetaria* throughout larger churches.

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As would be expected, icon motifs and their arrangement tend to reflect the preoccupations of Byzantine theology. Since the Fourth Ecumenical Council in Ephesus (431), the church has placed paramount importance on the Virgin Mary as "God-bearer" (*Theotokos*) as part of the church's response to the Nestorian claim that Mary had borne merely the human Jesus. The icon of the resurrection, which depicts the harrowing of hell, the binding of Satan, and the raising up of Adam and Eve, reflects the Greek Church's emphasis on the *Christus Victor* model of redemption, as contrasted with the Anselmian emphasis on atonement known in the West. The apse of St. Catherine's Monastery, built on Mt. Sinai on the purported site of the burning bush, contains a magnificent mosaic of the transfigured Christ, a stark visual reminder of the locale as itself transfigured through the church's typology. The emphasis on the transfiguration is vital to the theology of participation in the uncreated light of God, a doctrine known as "theosis," or deification, forged in the fourteenth century by the Hesychast movement under St. Gregory Palamas.

THE MEANING OF ICONS

This leads us back to what was said earlier, that to comprehend fully the meaning of icons to Greek Orthodox Christians, we must view them not simply as the sublime and sacred aids to piety, but also theologically, in light of the doctrine of the incarnation. Icons are the ultimate pictorial summary of the Greek Orthodox understanding of Christology, forged over three centuries of theological struggle.

The iconoclast emperors were part of a tradition of what John Meyendorff calls “Hellenic spiritualism,” most definitively expressed by Origen. This denied to matter the same God-created existence as the noetic, or intellectual, world. Concern for the material Jesus, it was claimed, fell short of worship in spirit and in truth: “Even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way” (2 Cor 5:16).

Yet St. Paul himself continues in the same place: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5:17). Iconophiles considered sacred images to be an aesthetic implication of the new order called into being when the Word was made flesh, thus sanctifying the material world. John of Damascus put it this way:

In former times, God, without body or form, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter.⁴

Icons do not separate or confuse the two natures of Christ, as Constantine V had claimed. Rather, it was the iconoclasts who confused the real distinction between nature and person. The prototype of the icon is not a nature at all, but a person, the *hypostasis* of the Logos, which assumed a human nature. This “hypostatic union” means that both natures preserve their own manner of being.

Icons uphold the church’s teaching of the true humanity of Christ, while maintaining his singular personhood as the second person of the Holy Trinity. The hypostatic union of humanity and divinity did not render Christ uncircumscribable. Indeed, as Theodore the Studite argued, an indescribable Christ meant a non-corporeal Christ. The defense of icons was thus in an important sense the working out of the christological formula of the Council of Chalcedon.

Some iconoclasts argued that sacred images must be viewed not only as acceptable, but as ontologically necessary. God was the first icon maker, his Son being “the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Heb 1:3)—“He is the image (Greek: *eikon*) of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). Between the Logos-Creator and the visible, sensible world exist several classes of intermediate images, a taxonomy that includes God’s preexistent ideas of what will come to be, then humans and angels,

⁴John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (New York: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1980) 23.

then the Scriptures (“verbal icons” that are the hermeneutical key to other images), and finally icons themselves, all in a hierarchical chain. In his extremely influential mystical treatise the *Celestial Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite instructs us that icons are part of the divine condescension to our weakness:

For it is quite impossible that we humans should, in any immaterial way, rise up to imitate and to contemplate the heavenly hierarchies without the aid of those material means capable of guiding us, as our nature requires. Hence, any thinking person realizes that the appearances of beauty are signs of an invisible loveliness.⁵

The image of Christ was for Theodore the Studite an image both of the man Jesus and the incarnate Logos. His icon is permanent witness to the fact that the Logos assumed all the characteristics of a man, including being circumscribable. But this man Jesus Christ was the New Adam, the first fruits of a new humanity, deified by the communication of idioms with his divinity. This is precisely why, in the Byzantine iconographic tradition, icons of Christ are inscribed with the words “Ho Ōn” (He who is), the Greek equivalent of YHWH, the sacred Hebrew tetragrammaton.

The theological consequences of the Byzantine theology of the image are thus of monumental importance to the Orthodox understanding of salvation. God created humans in his image and likeness. Christ is the perfect icon of God. The human, in turn, through sacred iconography makes an image of God in the form of the deified humanity of Jesus. The Orthodox icon thus leads us to the Orthodox understanding of the “chief benefit” of Christ’s incarnation—a sanctified world and a deified humanity. ⊕

JOHN KOSTAS is priest of St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. He holds an MA in classics and an MDiv degree from St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, and a ThM degree from Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. He has traveled widely in Greece and western Turkey.

⁵Pseudo Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, in *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) 146.

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