

The Sacred Image: The Development of Iconophile Thought in the Writings of St. John of Damascus and Theodore Abū Qurrah

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Abstract:

Described as ‘the last father of the church in the east’, John of Damascus (c. A.D. 675–649) was an Eastern theologian who lived under the Umayyad Caliphate (A.D. 661–750), known for his writings on the nature of Orthodoxy, icons, and heresies (especially Islam). His treatises on icons constituted some of the most comprehensive and substantial rebuttals to the iconoclast position, referenced in numerous subsequent works, including more modern disputes about images [such?] as those involving the Calvinists or Orthodox Russians. On the other hand, Theodore Abū Qurrah (c. A.D. 750–820) was a Christian theologian and Melkite bishop of Harrān, known for his Arabic tracts on various aspects of Christian belief, including the Chalcedonic understanding of the Trinity, the veneration of icons, and the problems of Judeo–Islamic doctrine. In terms of their relative approaches to the problems of iconoclasm, scholars assert that, aside from the audience for which they wrote, the arguments in favor of the veneration of images put forward by John of Damascus are materially no different from those of Theodore Abū Qurrah. Indeed, they present the latter as a successor to the former, continuing the tradition of defending religious icons. While there are certainly significant similarities in their work, to the degree that their views often resemble each other, this approach overlooks the subtle differences which arise in *how* they defend images, particularly how they conceive of the individual, of patristic tradition, and of God. By comparing the development of their arguments, it is possible to understand how these minor variations create a situation whereby the two men have divergent theological visions about the act of individual worship and the nature of divinity. Consequently, they come to interpret the relation between man and God in fundamentally different ways.

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The periods of Byzantine iconoclasm (A.D. 726–787 and A.D. 815–842)^[1] represent some of the most significant Christological controversies of Late Antiquity. Unlike previous heresies, such as Arianism or Nestorianism,^[2] the iconoclast movement was not simply concerned with doctrine, but how theology related to established custom and ritual.^[3] For the sake of clarity, iconoclasts were individuals who opposed the veneration of images, sometimes going so far as to destroy certain types of representations, while iconophiles supported the use of images as key components of Christian worship. Both iconoclast and iconophile thinkers saw their interpretations of icons as ways of ensuring harmony between the beliefs and practices of the Church. As such, the iconoclast controversy was fundamentally about how an individual *should* interact with and understand an invisible, incomprehensible deity. While historians initially considered the movement to have been caused by the contamination of Byzantine society by Judeo–Islamic attitudes and policies (such as the edict of Yazid II in A.D. 723),^[4] recent scholarship takes the view that iconoclasm was the result of internal conflicts within Christian communities as to the correct mode of interpreting scripture and the role of ecclesiastical tradition. These disagreements emerged against the backdrop of rapid Islamic expansion into the former territories of the Byzantine Empire, the collapse of Byzantium as a “commonwealth of cities,”^[5] and the rise of a cult of icons. In this context, policies such as Emperor Leo III’s edict (A.D. 726)^[6] prohibiting the veneration of icons can be understood as responses to more general anxieties about the empire’s political and social instability. Many subsequent emperors and philosophers also saw the crises which had beset Byzantium as indications that Christian peoples had somehow displeased God. Therefore, in order

to remedy the situation, recognizing and eliminating the cause of that discontent seemed necessary. Given the presence of idolatry in various pagan communities and the numerous biblical condemnations of the practice, the custom of venerating icons appeared to them as persistence of a reprehensible tradition. John Haldon notes “that at the end of the century a desire for internal purity was the recurring theme of church and state rhetoric.”^[7] The varied policies implemented by successive rulers were then meant to resolve specific political issues by rectifying perceived doctrinal misconceptions, making “the icon explicitly and directly an object of political struggle, a central political symbol.”^[8]

In light of the politicization of the debates about images, both iconoclasts and iconophiles were forced to create distinct theological narratives to support their assessments of the practice of venerating icons. “Many ideas and attitudes that for centuries were only half articulate had to be fully crystallized; arguments that for many generations had remained up to a point either loose reflections or literary metaphors now had to be given a clear solution.”^[9] In both cases, they resorted to scripture and patristic tradition in order to legitimize their separate outlooks and were motivated by a genuine desire to be faithful to what they perceived to be the true will of God. They diverged in what they interpreted that fidelity to be. Their basic arguments are clearly expressed in the Seventh Ecumenical Council at Hieria (A.D. 754)^[10] and the Second Council at Nicaea (A.D. 787)^[11] respectively. However, while the Church councils were certainly significant as official articulations of the state’s and Church’s position on iconoclasm at specific points in the dispute, they often expanded upon the work of various other philosophers and church fathers, some of whom did not even live in the Byzantine territory. These types of sources provide a

vital opportunity to explore how a discourse defending icons materialized, especially the extent of variation and continuity within this discourse. Although many primary sources dealing with the iconoclast point of view have been lost or are only referred to in hostile iconophile writings, the works of major iconophile writers have survived into the present. To this end, the works of St. John of Damascus and Theodore Abū Qurrah are ideal.

Described as “the last father of the church in the east,”^[12] John of Damascus (c. A.D. 675–649)^[13] was an Eastern theologian who lived under the Umayyad Caliphate (A.D. 661–750)^[14] known for his writings on the nature of Orthodoxy, icons, and heresies (especially Islam). His treatises on icons constituted some of the most comprehensive and substantial rebuttals to the iconoclast position, referenced in numerous subsequent works including more modern disputes about images as those involving the Calvinists or Orthodox Russians.^[15] On the other hand, Theodore Abū Qurrah (c. A.D. 750–820) was a Christian theologian and Melkite bishop of Harrān,^[16] known for his Arabic tracts on various aspects of Christian belief, including the Chalcedonic understanding of the Trinity, the veneration of icons, and the problems of Judeo–Islamic doctrine. In terms of their relative approaches to the problems of iconoclasm, scholars^[17] assert that, aside from the audience for which they wrote, the arguments in favor of the veneration of images put forward by John of Damascus are materially no different from those of Theodore Abū Qurrah. Indeed, they present the latter as a successor to the former, continuing the tradition of defending religious icons. Sidney Griffith notes: “In [Abū Qurrah’s] tract on images, as indeed in all of his works, there is no appreciable progression of ideas beyond what his master had achieved.”^[18] Similarly, “Theodore, bishop of Harran, rose to become a worthy

successor to John of Damascus...”^[19] and “Theodore was very much John’s intellectual heir.”^[20] While there are certainly significant similarities in their work, to the degree that their views often resemble each other, this approach overlooks the subtle differences which arise in *how* they defend images, particularly how they conceive of the individual, of patristic tradition, and of God. By comparing the development of their arguments, it is possible to understand how these minor variations create a situation whereby the two men have divergent theological visions about the act of individual worship and the nature of divinity. Consequently, they come to interpret the relation between man and God in fundamentally different ways. As the aim of this paper is to trace the progression of their ideas and to compare why they have divergent conceptions of this relation, it is divided into three sections: an analysis of three treatises of John of Damascus, an investigation of Abū Qurrah’s tract, and a comparison of their portrayal of the individual vis à vis God.

St. John of Damascus and the Theology of Images

Given the breadth and variety of John of Damascus’ attempts to legitimize the practice of venerating icons, it is worth examining the way in which he defines an image and understands the practice of veneration before delving more deeply into the specific arguments he proposes. Indeed, over the course of his three treatises, these arguments tend to mutate into different forms depending on the situations in which he employs them. Therefore, an analysis of his vision of images and the nature of veneration is crucial to charting the overall development of his views. From the outset, John establishes a general definition of an image (*eikôn*) as “a likeness depicting an archetype but having some difference from it; the image

is not like the archetype in every way.”^[21] He notes that the image is both a representation *and* an imitation of the subject. As a representation, it serves as a symbol for what is depicted and the attitude of persons toward the image can be understood as an indication of their attitude toward the subject itself. “So everyone who honors the image clearly honors the archetype.”^[22] Yet, the image and the subject continue to be fundamentally different from one another. Essentially, as Moshe Barasch puts it, the image is purely “‘mimetic,’ or representative; it is only in relation to the prototype that the icon is an ‘image.’ Hence there can be no image that does not represent something.”^[23] Regardless of the faithfulness or accuracy of the depiction, the image is and always will be an aspect of what is depicted and not its entirety. For instance,

“the image of a human being may give expression to the shape of the body, but it does not have the powers of the soul; for it does not live, nor does it think, or give utterance, or feel, or move its members. And a son, although the natural image of a father, has something different from him, for he is son and not father.”^[24]

Distinguishing between the image and what it represents is central to John’s assertion that the veneration of an image is not the worship of the physical icon itself but a veneration of what it shows:

“The image of the emperor is called the emperor, yet there are not two emperors, for neither is the power divided nor the glory shared. For as the principle and authority that rules over us is one, so also is the praise that we offer one and not many, because the honor offered to the image passes to the archetype.”^[25]

He extends this notion of an image and its relation to its subject by presenting the concept of the Trinity as the existence of a singular God in three images, which are intrinsically one but are manifested in three forms:

“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 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 having his being after him.”^[26]

The son has a special relation to the father, “a primordial relationship, not produced by the artist’s skill, but found as given, as a primary, irreducible component of an ultimate reality.”^[27] In this regard, he frames images as inherent to Christian belief and not merely as an external practice.

Having established a general definition of icons, John looks at various types of icons and distinguishes them from each other by their subject matter. He argues that religious images can be categorized into six forms. The first is the natural image which is largely confined to God himself whereby “. . . the first natural and undeviating image of the invisible God is the Son of the Father.”^[28] Second, there is the image of God’s will: “there is also in God images and paradigms of what he is going to bring about, that is his will that is before eternity and thus eternal.”^[29] Third, mankind who is itself created as an image of God. As God asserts in Genesis, “Let us make human kind in accordance with our image and likeness.”^[30] Fourth, the scriptural references to various “shapes and forms and figures to convey a faint conception of God and the angels by depicting in bodily form what is invisible and

bodiless.”^[31] Fifth, allusions to what is to come, “as the ark foreshadows the holy Virgin Mother of God, as does the rod and the jar.”^[32] Lastly, there are images which act as memorials of past events: “for images were set up as memorials, and were honored not as gods, but as leading to a recollection of divine activities.”^[33] To Louth, this

“... is not just a list; it is an evocation of the multitude of ways in which reality echoes reality...It is a picture of the ways in which images establish relationships between realities: within the Trinity, between God and the providential ordering of the universe, between God and the inner reality of the human soul, between visible and invisible, between the past and the future, and the present and the past...[Thus]...to deny the images is to threaten the whole fabric of harmony and mediation based on the image.”^[34]

In addition to these varieties in an image’s subject, John argues that they are essentially the same as the written word of God. He enumerates the types of images in a way which emphasizes their similarity to the content of scripture itself. “Do you see how the function of image and word are one? ‘As in picture,’ he says, ‘we demonstrate by word.’”^[35] By developing an equivalency between icons and divine texts, he legitimizes the former as having the same purpose as the latter. “What the book does for those who understand letters, the image does for the illiterate; the word appeals to hearing, the image appeals to sight; it conveys understanding.”^[36] John’s argument functions on two distinct levels: he refers to the multiple images mentioned in the Bible *and* depicts the Bible itself as a kind of image (or archetype) of certain aspects of divine knowledge. This provides a justification both for the use of images as allusions and

legitimizes the manufacture of material icons as no different from the production of Bibles.

Aside from the justification for images themselves, John also examines the forms of reverence, distinguishing between the act of worship (*latreia*) and the act of honoring a particular subject through veneration (*proskinesis*).^[37] To him, veneration

“... is a symbol of submission and honor. And we know different forms of this. The first is as a form of worship, which we offer to God, alone by nature worthy of veneration. Then there is the veneration offered...to his friends and servants, as Jesus...venerated the angel; or to the places of God, as David said, ‘Let us venerate in the place where his feet stood’, or to the things sacred to Him, as Israel venerated the tabernacle...or to those rulers who had been ordained by Him, as...his brothers venerated Jacob.”^[38]

The major difference in all these instances is an individual’s intent in carrying out the act of veneration. For instance, in the case of David, he venerates God through the place where “his feet stood.” In practical terms, he is honoring the physical space but because he consciously intends the honor he gives to the space to be directed to God himself, he is actually worshiping God. Closely connected to this vision of worship versus veneration is the underlying motivation which moves an individual. He identifies the main motivations for worship as: 1) the worship of God because He “is alone venerable by nature;”^[39] 2) an awareness of God’s “natural glory;”^[40] 3) “thanksgiving for the good things that have befallen us;”^[41] 4) a consequence of “our neediness and our hope in his kindness;”^[42] and 5) the desire for forgiveness.^[43] In his analysis of the role of the intended object of veneration and the

desire for veneration, John presents the individual as a complex entity influenced by various impulses and desires. Moreover, he argues that the individual is also cognizant of his actions and understands that the icon is an archetype of a subject and not the subject itself. The notion of intentionality is at the core of John's assertion that Christians are unlikely to slip into the habit of idolatry as alleged by iconoclast thinkers.

While Abū Qurrah shares this view of the significance of intentionality, his tract does not delve into the question of motivation (discussed later in this paper) in the way that John of Damascus's work does. In the latter's writings, there is a more thorough examination of human behavior and its influence on the practice of religion.

Having looked at how John defines icons and the act of veneration, there are three key areas of his argument which are crucial to his representation of man and God: the significance of the incarnation, scriptural support for the veneration of icons, and the importance of maintaining Church tradition. From the outset, John recognizes that there are passages in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, which forbid the creation of icons:

"I know that the One who cannot lie said: 'the Lord your God is one Lord,' and 'you shall venerate the Lord your God and him alone shall you worship,' and 'there shall be for you no other gods,' and 'you shall not make any carved likeness, of anything in heaven above or on the earth below,' and 'all who venerate carved [images] shall be put to shame.'" [44]

However, he asserts that this applies to the time preceding the incarnation of God as Christ and that God, by *consenting* to come before mankind in human form, has allowed for ordinary mortals to perceive Him using

their physical faculties. As a result, He has also consented to being depicted in the form that makes Him visible to people. Individuals are

“. . . emboldened to depict the invisible God, not as invisible, but as he became visible for [their] sake, by participation in flesh and blood. [They] do not depict the invisible divinity. . . [they] . . . depict God made visible in the flesh." [45]

Certain biblical passages which prohibit the portrayal of God were justified because they were revealed before the incarnation when it would have been impossible to render a God who transcends the limitations of physical features. It was only in coming to earth as Christ that God manifested in a form which humans could understand, quantify, and represent. John of Damascus cites the Bible:

"'For,' it says, 'you have not seen his form.' What wisdom the legislator has! . . . For it is clear that when you 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 been accepted to be seen." [46]

Therefore, the icons of God do not claim to be representations of the God who came "to the immaterial eyes of the intellect," [47] but of Christ who permitted himself to be seen in the flesh because "our analogies [were] not capable of raising us immediately to

intellectual contemplation but [needed] familiar and natural points of reference.”^[48] To Kenneth Parry this echoes the opinion of the patriarch Germanos who considered the depiction of Christ an affirmation of a Chalcedonic understanding of Christ’s full humanity: “The icon of Christ is both a means of confirming the reality of the incarnation, and the means of refuting those who believe Christ merely appeared to take on human nature.”^[49]

Subsequently, John also delves into the possible motivations for God allowing Himself to be perceived in the figure of Christ. While his central motivation for this has to do with the notion of sin and God’s desire to redeem humanity through the incarnation, in the context of the veneration of icons, John argues that God showing Himself was a way of guiding humankind. Just as spiritual concepts guide the intellect, John argues that the physical form of Christ and the miracles he performs guide people toward a greater emotional closeness to God. Therefore, the incarnation seems to be a way in which God is responding to an intrinsic human need to grasp the nature of divinity:

“You, perhaps, are exalted and immaterial and have come to transcend the body and as fleshless, so to speak, you spit with contempt on everything visible, but I, since I am a human being and wear a body, I long to have communion in a bodily way with what is holy and to see it.”^[50]

Consequently, the creation of icons is an attempt to comprehend an infinitely complex being in human terms. In this section of his work, John presents God as actively engaging with individual desires and possessing a deep understanding of human psychology. Moreover, he asserts that God was driven by love in wanting to provide mankind with frames of reference which He could appreciate. For

“... we are led by images perceived through the senses to divine and immaterial contemplation and, out of love for human kind, the divine providence provides figures and shapes of what is without shape or figure, to guide us by hand.”^[51]

The second aspect of John’s defense is concerned with the importance of interpretation, especially *correct* interpretation, of the Bible itself. He constantly refers to “Christ’s rational flock”^[52] and argues that there is an internal logic to the various passages of the Bible which, on the surface, seem to contradict one another. In order to apprehend this logic, it is necessary to understand “the spirit hidden beneath the letter.”^[53] He writes: “Brothers, those who do not know the Scriptures truly err, for as they do not know that ‘the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life...’”^[54] He acknowledges instances in the Bible which seem opposed to the portrayal of any part of creation: “...Beware lest you act lawlessly of a male or a female, a likeness of any beast that is upon the earth, a likeness of any winged bird.”^[55] However, he also identifies examples where God commands the children of Israel to make material representations of created objects. For example, God “prescribe[d] carved cherubim fashioned by human hands to overshadow the mercy seat.”^[56] Similarly, He ordered Moses to depict what he saw on the mountain when creating the tabernacle. John provides copious references of individuals portraying aspects of reality at God’s command. He dissolves this contradiction by stressing that God forbade the creation of images at certain points *because* mankind had not yet reached a stage of maturity where it was immune to idolatrous tendencies. In this sense, God was not opposed to images in themselves but could recognize the way in which individuals may relate to them. John writes:

“For the law having a shadow of the good things to come, not being itself the image of the realities.’ If then the law prohibits images while being in itself a depiction of the image in advance, what shall we say? If the tabernacle is a shadow and the figure of a figure, how then can the law command that images be not drawn?”^[57]

Thus, the Bible is not contradicting itself, rather iconoclasts themselves misconstrue its true intent as it is impossible for “what the law orders to be made [to also be] prohibited by the law.”^[58]

John uses the argument of people’s level of maturity (or immaturity) to point out that the forbidding of icons was strictly “for the Jews, on account of their sliding into idolatry, that these things were ordained by law.”^[59] They

“. . . too, used to have many different images and signs for the remembrance of God, before [they] were deprived of them because of [their] folly, namely, the Mosaic staff, the divinely-engraved tablets, the bush bedewed with fire, the rock dry yet giving water, the manna-bearing ark, the altar containing divine fire, the golden plate bearing the divine name, the ephod revealing God, the God-enshrouded tabernacle.”^[60]

In contrast, Christians recognized the foolishness of idolatry and are aware 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.”^[61] As such, they have evolved to a point where they “are no longer children enslaved by the elements of the law as children, but [they are] being restored to perfect manhood . . . [and] are nourished with solid food, no longer prone to idolatry.”^[62]

This cognizance of “what can be depicted and what cannot be delineated in an image”^[63] allows Christian individuals to escape the problematic impulses of the Jews who did not have the same capacity for discernment. Here, he likens God to a physician who “knows not always to give the same remedy to all, but supplies to each one what is suitable, determining a medicine appropriate to place and disease and time, that is, season and condition and time of life.”^[64] While John thought that Christians generally were not in danger of idolatry, he also believed that individuals themselves had the ability to use rationality and logic to comprehend the varied and evolving nature of divine communication. He imbues the individual with considerable agency alluding to their capacity to grasp complex theological phenomenon, to distinguish between the image and the archetype.

Finally, let us turn to his emphasis on preserving Church tradition, particularly the practice of venerating the saints. John notes that the icons of saints are necessary in two respects: they deserve honor as friends of God and they provide examples of good conduct. He maintains that because

“. . . saints are the army of the Lord . . . they are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ and partakers of the divine glory and kingdom, how shall not the friends of Christ be also fellow partakers on earth of his glory? ‘I do not call you slaves,’ says God, ‘you are my friends.’ O rash hand! O audacious opinion, rebelling against God and refusing to perform his commands.”^[65]

He contends that to offer veneration to the icons of Christ but not to the icons of saints betrays an underlying hypocrisy which contradicts biblical and church values. To him,

“. . . it is clear that [such persons] do not prohibit images, but rather the honor due to the saints, something that no one has ever dared to do or undertake with such brazenness . . . ‘For I live,’ says the Lord, ‘and I shall glorify those who glorify me.’”^[66]

Moreover, he notes that the images of saints serve as continuous reminders of the persons “whose conduct we should look to and whose faith we should imitate.”^[67] For John, these are irreplaceable components of patristic tradition^[68] and to alter them is to create a problematic precedent which threatens other aspects of belief which also rely on tradition. “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.”^[69] The most noteworthy example of the importance of tradition’s connection to scripture has to do with the very nature of incarnation:

“Where did you find clearly in the Old [Testament] or in the Gospel the name of the Trinity or *homoousion* or one nature of the divinity or three hypostaseis expressly or one hypostasis of Christ or two natures expressly? But nevertheless, since the holy Fathers define these [terms] from words found in Scripture that have the same force, we accept them and anathematize those who do not accept them.”^[70]

Throughout the text, John creates a framework for understanding the nature of images and, indeed, the nature of veneration, which affirms the internal consistency and constancy of Church tradition and divine scripture. “We shall not suffer different things to be thought at different times, changing with the seasons, and the faith to

become the matter of ridicule and jest to ourselves.”^[71] As a result, he develops a definition of the purpose of images and applies it to God and those closest to Him. The icon of the saint functions in the same way as the icon of Christ. While an individual worships Christ through his icon, he venerates the saint through the saint’s image. In both cases, he honors the subject of visual or figural representation rather than the object itself. John dismisses the idea that the veneration of the saint’s image is somehow the worship of the saint himself, as opposed to God. Again, he stresses the ability of persons to distinguish between various icons and alter their intent depending on which icon they venerate and in what situation.

Theodore Abū Qurrah and the Defense of Icons

Unlike John of Damascus, Theodore Abū Qurrah does not provide a clear definition of what he perceives to be an image in his tract, nor does he delineate the different forms of veneration. Instead, he basically adheres to the definition established by John. Most significantly, Abū Qurrah agrees that honoring an icon is fundamentally different from worshiping the physical material which constitutes it. He also recognizes an equivalency between written language and icons as expressions of divine knowledge and affirms that the incarnation is in itself the creation of an image: “. . . God’s speech . . . was but an icon for the incarnation of Christ, the eternal Word of God.”^[72] A similar association is also made in the works of Ephrem the Syrian and Pseudo-Dionysus.^[73]

“. . . St. Athanasius said that for us believers, making prostration to God is not the same as making prostration to the icons; it is not like worshipping idols. Rather, with our prostration to icon or to cross, we undertake only to show love and affection for the person whose icon it is.”^[74]

He accepts the general structure developed by John and articulates his views in a similar manner. However, in certain sections, his approach deviates from his predecessor, modifying how he interprets the theological arguments developed by John. In order to understand how this occurs there are certain areas which require closer examination: the context in which he wrote, his analysis of the role of the individual versus patristic tradition, and his conception of the icons of saints. Abū Qurrah's changes are in themselves minor variations of John's ideas. Yet, the implications they have fundamentally alter the relationship between God and the individual ultimately presented by each work.

It is especially important to consider the context in which Abū Qurrah was writing when he produced his tract on images. While John of Damascus' three treatises are aware of the influence exerted by the Jewish tradition and certain interpretations of the Old Testament and were written while he lived in a Muslim territory, for the most part, his writings tend to focus on Byzantine iconoclasm and justifying icons within that tradition, responding to Christological arguments about the nature of veneration. Abū Qurrah also directs his arguments to a Christian audience. However, he seems largely disturbed by the problem of aniconism among the Christian populations of the East which he believes is precipitated by the contamination of established Church tradition by Jewish and Islamic influences. Therefore, he is more concerned with persuading individuals to continue the custom of venerating icons by discrediting the religious opponents of such practices, namely Jews and Muslims, than with engaging in debate about icons with other Christian theologians. Where "John is defending an article of faith, Theodore is meeting the problems faced by Christians in

an Islamic country who want to continue the traditional, and public, cultic act of veneration of icons."^[75] He writes:

"No one should be surprised at the Jew when he does not understand these things, because he is coarse and stupid . . . Rather, the surprise is that there are insane Christians turning away from the making the [sic] offer of prostration to the icon of Christ, and to the icons of the saints. These people do not doubt that the icon we have authenticated from the Old [Testament] accords with the interpretation we have given it. They think the old icon is worth the utmost honor, yet they are the ones fleeing from paying honor to the holy icons!"^[76]

At multiple points, Abū Qurrah asserts that Jewish and Islamic scholars are not merely opposed to the practice of venerating icons but also to the core aspects of Christian belief as a whole: the doctrine of the Trinity, the notion of baptism, communion, and so on.^[77] He argues that Christians should not allow their own vision of religion to be corrupted by the beliefs of outsiders who do not just condemn images but Christianity itself. The Christians who accept the criticism of icons but reject other criticisms are, according to Abū Qurrah, being hypocritical. "How is that they have not dealt similarly with any other integral part of Christianity because people vilify it, but they have remained complacent with it, even though people are quick to find it loathsome."^[78] He goes on to highlight aspects of Judaism and Islam which are even more preposterous than the theology of images:

"The marvel of those outsiders who believe in some of the scriptures sent down from God, is the fact that in

their own scriptures there are things similar to those features of Christianity, which the wise men of the world, whose minds are not all submissive to faith, find even more foolish than they find those features to be foolish . . . [such as] . . . ‘Be, and it becomes?’ (*al-Baqarah* II:117) . . . that the serpent spoke (Gen 3:1) . . . that Lot’s wife was changed into a pillar of salt (Gen 19:26) . . . that Jonah was in the belly of a whale for three days and three nights, and the whale spat him out alive and well (Jon 1:7; 2:10) . . . and much more like this?”^[79]

Additionally, he argues that Jews and Muslims also believe in the notion of intent in acts of worship and cannot assume that Christians are introducing a foreign concept in their defense of icons. This is illustrated whenever a Muslim prays. “His two knees touch but the ground or a carpet, yet his prostration is conveyed only according to what he intends – to make an act of prostration to God.”^[80]

Although he criticizes passages from both the Quran and the Old Testament, he spends considerably more time trying to discredit the latter. Indeed, he “often rhetorically addresses his arguments to an unnamed Jew.”^[81] Griffith notes that this could be because he was living in a Muslim territory and was wary of critiquing Islamic tradition too strongly:

“In the Islamic milieu in which he wrote, Abū Qurrah avoided direct references to Muslims. Like other defenders of the icons, however, he frequently directs his arguments against the Jews, who were widely charged with being at the root of hostility to icons in the Christian community.”^[82]

Over the course of the treatise, Abū Qurrah recognizes that Jews themselves were commanded to venerate certain physical objects and through them to honor specific archetypes. For instance, “it is . . . incumbent upon [Jews] to make prostration to the four rivers coming out of Paradise, and to make [their] frustration in the direction of the sun.”^[83] Similarly, “to make prostration to [the rock in Jerusalem] is incumbent upon [them], since [they] have been given proof that the act of prostration is sometimes by way of honor.”^[84] Like John, Abū Qurrah claims that the passages of the Old Testament forbidding icons were due to God’s awareness that the Israelites had a tendency toward idolatry, a tendency which no longer afflicts Christian peoples. As “. . . the Israelites had gone mad about worshipping idols if God had forthrightly given them permission to make prostration to images, they would have used God’s word as a pretext, and they would have run wild in worshipping idols.”^[85]

Abū Qurrah contends that this is the primary reason for the existence of certain ambiguous sections in the Bible. Christians were then able to interpret correctly only because they knew God’s intent. “He concealed the knowledge of this reality in all his scriptures, to become evident in his own good time.”^[86] They alone possessed “the subtlety to understand this matter.”^[87]

The second key feature of Abū Qurrah’s argument is the way he depicts the individual. While he values individual interpretation of scripture (as does John), the route he envisions for arriving at a particular interpretation is slightly different. He alludes to the “rule of reason”^[88] multiple times, but he immediately subordinates rationality to faith. In contrast, John merges the two and argues that faith and rationality, if applied correctly, ultimately lead to the same conclusion, a conclusion supported by

patristic tradition. Abū Qurrah, in placing faith above reason, implicitly divorces the two concepts. To him,

“anyone who has not attained the stature of a man in understanding spiritual things, must build on the foundation of fate and submit to whatever has become current practice in the church from the apostles, in the matter of the prostration made to the holy icons, or anything else. In faith there is insight.”^[89]

He reduces the role of the individual and converts what could be an interaction between man and divine scripture, facilitated by patristic tradition, into an interaction between patristic tradition and scripture, where the individual is largely irrelevant. This framework does not present faith as a confirmation of individual reality and truth but as a set of external beliefs which the individual is called upon to accept. Abū Qurrah dismisses rational wisdom: “Clearly, earthly wisdom is animalish, and the animalish person does not understand spiritual things.”^[90] On the other hand, John explains the internal consistencies of faith in terms of “earthly wisdom” and emphasizes the logical progression of his views in favor of venerating icons. This discrepancy between the two men’s writings can be understood through their divergent purposes in writing their respective treatises. Abū Qurrah’s primary motive was to convince Christians to resist Judaic and Islamic customs. As he was more concerned with unifying persons around a shared faith than in resolving internal contradictions within that faith, his argument tends to limit space for the complexities which would inevitably arise from numerous individual interactions with theology. He maintains that

“In all that he professes, every Christian must take a firm stand on the inside of faith. Surely every one of

the Christians to do so knows that for those accepting it, Christianity was proved true only by the miracles that the disciples worked in the name of Jesus Christ. Thereby reason judged correctly that they deserved that everything that they taught should be accepted.”^[91]

Thus, he prioritizes patristic tradition at the expense, to some degree, of individual agency.

The third aspect of Abū Qurrah’s work which deserves closer inspection is his conception of the icons of saints. Here, Abū Qurrah advances an argument which has no equivalent basis in the works of his predecessor. While John stresses the importance of honoring saints as friends and companions of God, he does not necessarily distinguish between the icons of Christ and saints. In his view, they both have the same objective: they act as a physical representation of a person or object through which an individual can honor that subject. The icon itself has no power beyond its symbolic function. Abū Qurrah alters that dynamic and argues that the icons of saints are special *because* they intercede with God on behalf of those who venerate them. “These people act as one’s proxies at the king’s door, securing one’s needs for him, in his absence or in his presence.”^[92] So “whoever honors the saints, no doubt deserves the greatest reward from the God of the saints and the saints become his representatives at God’s gate. They raise up his prayers, strengthen them, and ask for their fulfillment from the Lord in his behalf.”^[93]

The icon ceases to be a passive object. It no longer serves a merely representational value, reflecting an individual’s desire to honor a divine subject. On the contrary, it begins to mediate exchange between people and the saints they choose to venerate,

converting the simple act of honoring a saint into a more complex exchange. People may choose to venerate certain saints over others depending on who they believe can guarantee their desires. If the icon has the capacity to do this, it makes the image not merely a focal point for divine contemplation but an object which has some power intrinsic to it. This echoes the view which precipitated iconoclast backlash to begin with. As Brubaker writes, iconoclasm rejected the belief that images or relics of the saint “had the same ‘real presence’ as the complete body.”^[94] According to Abū Qurrah’s assessment, images of saints “are shown poised to receive the petitions of the faithful.”^[95] In such a vision, the role of God is altered. Abū Qurrah maintains that

“The magnanimity [of God] has surpassed all imagination, that he should withhold 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...How many times is it mentioned in the scriptures that God was done on account of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – after their demise!”^[96]

This version of God seems more human than divine in His desire for attention. He no longer comes across as a divine being aware of and responding to the intrinsic needs of human beings but as a kind of figure more concerned with the popularity of His companions. It also makes venerating saints no longer a complementary aspect of individual worship but an integral component to it.

The Role of the Individual and the Nature of Divinity

Having separately traced the evolution of John and Abū Qurrah’s narratives, we

understand how their varied conceptions of the relationship between man and God formed. In particular, there are certain areas where differences in their approaches are most pronounced: the degree to which they emphasize the incarnation, their views of the icons of saints, and the problem of individual agency. The main difference between the approach that John of Damascus has toward the incarnation as compared to Abū Qurrah is that the former makes the idea of God’s consent the centerpiece of his argument. He views God’s decision to come to earth as Christ as the fundamental justification for images. His treatises legitimize the creation, and consequently the veneration, of icons because God allowed Himself to be perceived in the figure of Christ. This “supersessionist treatment of the relationship between the Old and New Covenant”^[97] necessitates a reevaluation of pertinent theological questions, especially those involving icons. As such, the reinterpretation of scripture is vindicated, to some extent, by the physical manifestation of Christ. Jaś Elsner affirms that

“The icon is ontologically validated through its Incarnational participation in Christ’s two natures, and it is through its quality as matter – fully accessible to humanity – that its access to Christ’s divine nature is made possible. The Christology both justifies the icon on ontological grounds as acceptable and gives it its epistemological position as conduit by which one may know God”^[98]

Furthermore, from the perspective of icons, John situates the incarnation as God recognizing and responding to a basic human need, namely the need to comprehend an infinite, inconceivable divinity in human terms. Within this framework, the character of God is presented as an involved, affectionate deity sensitive to the needs of

mankind and willing to engage with it. Since “man is a derivative and relative creature . . . [this] . . . is based on the unique relationship between God and man established at the time of the creation.”^[99] In contrast, Abū Qurrah does not focus on the incarnation and barely mentions it, aside from a few slight allusions. The reluctance to adopt this aspect of John’s argument may be because of the context in which he is writing. As Griffith noted earlier, Abū Qurrah did not want to instigate the Muslim populations given that he was living in Arab-controlled territory. Therefore, he tends to avoid direct references to Christ as God incarnate. However, regardless of the possible justification for this omission, the inevitable effect is that his tract portrays a detached version of God, removed from the immediate realm of human affairs.

Abū Qurrah further heightens this separation between man and God when he analyzes the icons of saints. Here, his vision departs appreciably from John of Damascus. While John considers the images of saints to serve the same purpose as the icons of Christ, Abū Qurrah argues that they have an intrinsic purpose aside from being mere representations. Essentially, venerating the icon of a particular saint awakens that saint to intercede on behalf of the supplicant with God. Abū Qurrah notes that often God does not respond to the prayers of individuals until they venerate a saint, thereby ensuring saints receive the honor God believes is their due. This view severely undermines the claims made by both John and Abū Qurrah himself that the icon has no power of its own, it is merely a focal point designed to symbolize the archetype itself or to encourage contemplation of divine phenomenon. Hence, the irrelevance of its materiality. However, if the icon is a means of communicating with saints, it has some inherent authority. It is no longer a passive illustration of a subject but a direct line to that subject, capable of persuading it to take

certain actions. Individuals may choose to venerate saints whom they believe they are more capable of influencing or are closer to God. It renders the act of honoring a saint into a kind of transactional relationship, where veneration itself is a currency. At its core, this outlook makes the image of the saint a conduit for communicating with God. In this situation, the view that there is a “difference [in] essence between image and prototype”^[100] is weakened. Additionally, the notion of a deity who withholds its aid, despite knowing the desperation of the suppliant, conflicts with the interpretation put forward by John. In John’s framework, God continually responds to the psychological desires of human beings, most significantly through the incarnation which allows Him - and by extension His divinity - to be depicted and understood in the language of images. On the other hand, Abū Qurrah portrays the opposite: a God more concerned with His own needs, rather than those of His followers.

Aside from John of Damascus and Abū Qurrah’s attitudes toward the figure of God, they also take conflicting approaches to the problem of individual agency. While both men place substantial emphasis on the act of interpreting - and in some cases reinterpreting - scripture, they have slightly different visions as to who is responsible for this reinterpretation. John adopts a two-pronged approach, whereby both the individual and the patristic tradition have the right to engage with biblical texts. To him, although tradition as a whole is unlikely to be mistaken, both individuals and Church fathers are susceptible to misreading the true intent behind certain passages (such as may have been the case with Epiphanius the Great).^[101] Despite his support of patristic tradition, John continually asserts that it is an individual’s right and duty to further their understanding of divine knowledge. To this end, he stresses the importance of combining faith and reason when attempting to

comprehend the inherent meaning of spiritual texts, highlighting how the words of God have an internal cohesion and consistency. His own analysis makes use of Aristotelian and Neoplatonist notions of rationality and logic to defend icon veneration.^[102] The individual is not merely the passive recipient of faith, but an active agent involved in a search for divine truth. The incarnation enables the use of faith and the physical senses to understand and rationalize the nature of divinity. For John,

“... since human beings are related to both the spiritual and the material realms, their thought necessarily reflects both realms. While he acknowledged that some thought processes in human learning are limited to intellectual apprehension alone, he asserted that stimuli from and memory of the sensible realm are necessary components of the full spectrum of human thought. This is not, for him, a regrettable limitation on an intellect aspiring to its proper disembodied state, but rather a manifestation of true human liberty: united in a good creation to the material realm, humans have their thought processes shaped by that realm.”^[103]

Abū Qurrah also mentions the importance of reason in reading spiritual texts. Yet, for the most part, his argument is concerned with established custom. He presents an acceptance of Church tradition as the only rational course of action. Compared to John, he does not make space for more complex interactions between a person and their view of their own faith. This can be understood as an outcome of his purpose in writing the tract: to unify Christian people around a single doctrine. As a result, the act of seeking God is converted into an inactive acceptance of what happens to be the existing norm, serving

to widen the distance between man and the divine, because neither entity is actively attempting to know or pursue the other. His construction of the theology of images does not have “a multivalent character,”^[104] seeking merely to “convince recalcitrant Christians of the legitimacy of their practice of venerating images.”^[105]

Conclusion

Having looked at their respective visions of the relationship between icons and worship, it becomes clear that John of Damascus and Abū Qurrah are not repeating or repackaging the same argument, but really have very different ideas of the individual vis à vis the divine. To some extent, these variations can be understood as products of the societies in which they were writing and, more importantly, who they were writing for. However, regardless of why they differ from each other, they both have divergent views of the relationship between man and God. While John visualizes the individual as an active agent engaging with the word of God and patristic tradition, Abū Qurrah makes tradition central to his argument at the expense of human agency. Similarly, the absence of a Christological basis, through the incarnation, for venerating icons of Christ from his tract reduces the degree to which God takes part in human affairs and responds to human needs. In this respect, although he affirms many of the positions first expressed by John, it would be inaccurate to define Abū Qurrah merely as his intellectual or spiritual heir. He transforms John’s basic ideas and applies them in fundamentally different ways. The divergence is clearest in the case of the icons of saints. John presents them as sources of inspiration or men worthy of reverence because of their closeness to God. Abū Qurrah makes these images components of worship, possessing agency of their own. Such variations in their arguments not only alter the character of man and of God, but

also how they should theoretically interact with each other. This mutation changes foundational elements of John's narrative and while the two write within the same iconophile tradition, they approach the issue from distinct theological conceptions of the value of individual activity and divine engagement with the mortal world.

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