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The Writings of John of Damascus During the First Iconoclast Controversy

Alejandro Sills , '13

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Abstract:

The subject of this inquiry is Saint John of Damascus, an eighth-century Syrian monk who wrote against Byzantine Iconoclasm. Through a study of his writings and the works that he cited, together with an investigation into modern scholarship, this thesis argues that his claim for the custom of image veneration as a legitimate part of Christian worship from its earliest days is sound. In the process, the paper looks into the evolution of historiography surrounding the subject, with implications for how to approach ancient sources.

Introduction

Saint John of Damascus was a figure immersed in an age of intellectual ferment in religious affairs. Born in Umayyad Syria in the second half of the seventh century, he emerged in the 730s and 740s as a key opponent of Byzantine Emperor Leo III and his followers of iconoclasm. This development had roots stretching back several centuries, as a distinctly Christian artwork developed out of the culture of the old Roman Empire, and as Christian theologians formally codified the system of beliefs and practices.

The Iconoclasts contended that image veneration violated scriptural injunctions and early Christian traditions. They put a particular focus on portrayals of Jesus Christ; since theologians had long formulated the relation of His humanity to His divinity[1], the Iconoclasts used the invisibility of the divine aspect of Christ's nature as a major basis in their case against portraying Him. John, by contrast, argued for its role as a legitimate form of worship with plenty of historical precedent, as will be shown both in his own writings and in the findings of modern scholars.

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[1] Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology,* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2002), p. 9-10, who discusses the ramifications of the monumental Council of Chalcedon (451) and its repercussions in much of the book.

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In his efforts to portray his defense of images as rooted in a historically solid tradition, John went so far as to downplay his authorship. In the preface to *The Fount of Knowledge,* one of the first comprehensive repositories of Christian philosophy and theology, he wrote, "*I shall add nothing of my own,* but shall gather together into one those things which have been worked out by the most eminent of teachers and make a compendium of them, being in all things obedient to your command."[2]

Image of Christ, sixth or seventh century, Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, Egypt. Source: Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm,* (Princteon, NJ, Princeton University Press 2002), p. 109

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[2] *Saint John of Damascus: Writings,* tr. Frederic Chase, Jr., (New York, Fathers of the Church , 1958), p. 6, emphasis mine

The following questions on this subject will be investigated: What do the often-cited texts, used by people on both sides of the debate, really argue? What are the various historians' positions on the veracity of John's position? What factors moved John to write as a member of a collective rather than as an individual, as indicated in the above quote? Why did John feel moved to write about image veneration as part of Christian religious practice? In providing answers, this thesis will argue that John's appeal to tradition had support rooted in the historical evidence, as well as being confirmed in the more recent historiography.

Background

Born Yanah ibn Mansur ibn Sargun in roughly 676 (accounts vary), John of Damascus was a member of the Mansur family, which was centered in the region of present-day Syria.[3] Although Syria was firmly under the rule of the Muslim Umayyads at this time, the Mansur clan was able to maintain its adherence to Christian worship. The clan, as stated in Andrew Louth's book *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, was Melkite in theology, being part of a population centered in the Levant that maintained the imperial Orthodoxy as defined at Chalcedon even while most of the other Christians of the region rejected the formulation of the doctrine.[4] In spite of the humbled *dhimmi* status of the religious families and groups who were not Muslim, the Mansurs appeared to be financially and socially well off. John's father had him tutored in mathematics by a former captive Sicilian monk, Cosmas, and groomed him for the hereditary position of *protosymbulus,* or vizier of Damascus under the caliph.[5]

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[3] Chase, p. v

[4] Louth, p. 12. The official Chalcedonian formulation of Christ's essence was that he was of two natures, human and divine, and two wills, both human and divine, and that these were both complete, yet separate, and never in conflict with each other.

[5] Louth, p. vii

Louth suggested that John resigned his position around 706, when al-Walid was Caliph in Damascus.[6] According to older sources such as the theological romance *Barlaam and Ioasoph,* however,[7] the catalyst for the change was an incident at the caliphal court in 726 or 730. In this account, John's writings on Iconoclasm inflamed the Byzantine Emperor to the point where he (the Emperor) forged a letter to the Caliph making it seem like John planned to hand over the city to Byzantine forces. The caliph responded by cutting off John's hand. John, in turn, purportedly had his hand restored after praying to an icon of the Virgin Mary. Upon seeing this, the caliph offered John back his post in recompense for his false suspicions. John, however, took this opportunity to leave the civil service and devote himself to monasticism. Though Louth reveals this account as a pious fictionalization of historical events, it may underscore an identity crisis on the part of John, a topic to be fleshed out later in the thesis.

Although Louth disputed the traditional account that John spent his monastic life in the monastery of St. Sabas, he did not dispute that John may have lived near Jerusalem. Regardless, access to stellar education would enable him to debate and refute the fine points of the Iconoclast controversy when it arose in the first half of the eighth century. The situation was no spontaneous occurrence, but was the product of a long and turbulent social history that stretched all the way back to the origins of Christianity itself. The Abrahamic faiths have often been misunderstood, as will soon be explained, with regards to the use of religious imagery since the formulation of the prohibition of idolatrous imagery in Leviticus. The situation reveals its complexity, for example, with God's command to *create* images in particular situations, such as the cherubim that adorned His

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[6] Louth,, p. 6

[7] As described in Louth, pp 16-18

Ark of the Covenant or the snake-headed staff to heal the venomous snakebites inflicted on certain rebellious Israelites.[8] This highlights the foundation for action and reaction regarding religious imagery that would permeate Judeo-Christian discourse for millennia to come.

John's Foray

John of Damascus was well versed in the various styles of religious writing. His writings tend to be divided into defenses of the Faith as defined in the first six Ecumenical Councils, sermons or homilies, and sacred poetry.[9] He was part of an age and a tradition, however, that would have disavowed any claim to originality in his writings in the sense that is used today. This disavowal of innovation or original thought, while possibly a deterrent to the sin of pride, may have had a practical effect of assuaging fears in a world subject to drastic innovations in politics and lifestyle east of the Mediterranean. By presenting anything new as tradition, John helped to preserve the sense of Christian identity, at least in his monastic setting, which was always in danger of being swallowed up in the Islamic manifold.

His case for image veneration *qua* image veneration is relatively straightforward. Although he wrote about the subject off and on in other works such as his *On the Orthodox Faith,* the sources that provide John's case against Iconoclasm are to be found in three treatises, put together in a corpus entitled *On the Divine Images.*

The first treatise makes a distinction between idolatry and veneration, as the earliest Iconoclasts associated the practice with worship of false gods. Against such a charge, John makes a distinction between *proskynesis* (proper respect for someone or something

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[8] The New American Bible, Numbers, 21:5-9

[9] Louth, p. 9

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that may involve physical prostration, as for a ruler or the head of a family) and *latreia,*
or worship.[10] The term *latreia* implies a devotion that is total in its essence, not to be
superseded by duty to a higher authority, and traditionally associated with God. It is
properly viewed as synonymous with the word "adoration," which unfortunately is used
interchangeably with the word "veneration" by older historians. In an edition of the
primary source itself, John cites examples in the Scriptures of what he means:

> Abraham did homage to the faithless men who sold him
> the cave which became a tomb, and bowed his knee to
> the ground, but he did not worship them as gods. Jacob
> blessed Pharoah, who was an impious idolator, but he
> did not bless him as God. Again, he bowed down to the
> ground at Esau's feet, yet did not worship him as God.[11]

John made clear that Orthodox worshippers pay homage to the images of Jesus, Mary and
saintly figures in the sense of *proskynesis,* venerating or worshipping that which they
signify rather than the image itself.

He made use of licit Old Testament imagery to support his case further, citing the
example of the cherubim adorning the Ark of the Covenant, which the Scriptures state
that God had explicitly commanded the Israelites to do.[12] To reject the idea of sacred
interaction with the material world, then, would entail that one is rejecting matter as evil.
In John's own words: "Would you say that the ark, or the staff, or the mercy-seat, were
not made by hands? Are they not the handiwork of men? Do they not owe their existence
to what you call contemptible matter?"[13] This point was important for John to get across,
since such a view is associated with Manichaeism, which posits realms of inherently

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[10] Louth, p. 201

[11] *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images* tr. David Anderson, (Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir's Press edition, 1958) pp. 41-42

[12] Anderson p. 22-23

[13] Anderson, p. 22

good spirit and inherently evil matter.[14] On Christianity's reasoning, all that God creates is intrinsically good, including matter.

The second treatise is notable for the anti-Jewish spin that John puts in his defense of images. He wrote that image making in the manner that Orthodox Christians engaged in was forbidden under Mosaic law only because the Jews "were still children and

Gold-encrusted icon of Michael the Archangel, tenth century.
Source: Bissera V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium,* (University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010) p. 98

susceptible to the sickness of idolatry,"[15] whereas Christians "are grown up"[16] and no longer prone to such a predilection. This plays into the popular notion of a "mature" faith in Christianity superseding the previous covenant of Judaism.

Anderson, p

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Louth mentions John's strategy in relation to the strategy of another early Christian figure writing in support of images, Bishop Leontios of Neapolis in Cyprus.[17] Leontios did not argue, as John did, that the prohibition on image veneration was superseded by the Incarnation of Christ, or that it was a matter of spiritual maturity. Rather, Leontios argued for common ground with Jews on the grounds that there were "cultic objects" in Solomon's Temple for which he was not condemned.[18] If God permitted this, the logic went, then surely Christian "cultic objects" such as icons should be permissible as well. The explanation for the differing approaches lies in the intended audiences; Leontios was speaking directly to communities of Jews who were accusing Christians of idolatry. John wrote directly against the Iconoclasts, shaming them "with the reproach of being Judaizers,"[19] a result of his failure to factor in Leontios's observations on other Old Testament imagery.[20]

John did not write about Iconoclasm as an isolated subject. His *Fountainhead of Knowledge* contains an extensive list of heresies that plagued the Church in either the present or the past. A comprehensive listing of all of the heresies John dealt with would run far too long for this inquiry, but a few examples are tangentially related to the Iconoclastic controversy.

One group, the Nestorians, adopted a heretical view of Christology which maintained that the Second Person of the Trinity was not identical to the human Jesus.[21] Although they maintained that two natures were present in the Incarnation, they interpreted this to

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[17] Louth, pp. 210-212

[18] Anderson, p. 43

[19] Louth, pp. 210-212

[20] In Louth, p. 207, the author states that there is a third treatise, yet it is short, and largely incorporates passages from the first and second treatises; the parts that are new simply expand upon the themes of the first two treatises.

[21] Chase, p. 138

mean that there were two persons within the one *hypostasis,* or "existence of an individual substance in itself."[22] This has much in common with the doctrine of adoptionism, in which God the Father adopted an ordinary man as His Son, as well as being a type of spirit possession.

Another group was the Monophysites, who held that there was only one nature in Christ, either purely divine, or perhaps a mixed divine/human nature.[23] This, too, was condemned at the Council of Chalcedon, which insisted that there are two natures in Christ that are connected, yet distinct from each other, not existing in a mixture. In addition, rather than being "half and half," as the above heresies maintained, the Chalcedonians insisted that Christ was both full*y* divine *and* fully human, a doctrine termed the hypostatic union.

Accepting either heresy as true would have had problematic implications for the Quinisext Council's pronouncements on the permissibility of portraying Christ in artwork. The 82nd canon of this council, held in 692, stated that Jesus Christ, who had been portrayed symbolically in artwork as a lamb, was henceforth to be depicted as a man in order to better reflect the truth of the Incarnation.[24] Since Nestorianism teaches that Christ's more glorious, divine actions (i.e. miracle working) could not be genuinely accredited to the human nature, portraying this human nature in artwork would be inappropriate, as the icon would be signifying the life and actions of the wrong person within the Incarnation.

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[22] Chase, p. 67

[23] Chase, p. 147

[24] Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm,* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 42

Monophysitism would have meant that Christ still should not be portrayed, but for a different reason. The point of the Quinisext Council, again, was to argue for the permissibility of portraying God the Son since He had become human and thus material. If, according to the Monophysite understanding, Christ were not truly human, portraying Him would have been just as irreverent as portraying God the Father, a taboo still upheld during the eighth century.

The above examples serve to reinforce the intellectual sophistication of John of Damascus by portraying him as seeing various inquiries as interconnected. Iconoclasm happened to be one of many concerns that plagued the Byzantine Church during John's lifetime, but since it was a matter of political and public policy, it was particularly worth addressing for him.

Modern Voices

Historiography, the manner in which writers interpret the questions surrounding historical developments, is anything but infallible, and has changed drastically over time. Historians in the first half of the twentieth century have emphasized the political sphere, citing official policies by Byzantine emperors in their efforts to consolidate power. They also adopted an approach that took the sources at their word, not figuring on the possibility or actual occurrence of interpolations into ancient texts by later writers.

More recent historians have cited cultural and theological aspects, arguing that the iconoclastic controversy was more strictly a matter of theology and aesthetics, and was the primary catalyst for the political sphere's handling of the issue. They also insist on a more skeptical reading of the primary sources dealing with the subject. This approach, as will be shown, strengthens the case for icon veneration as argued by John of Damascus.

The writer Ernst Kitzinger took the older, political approach to this controversy. He claimed in his influential article "The Cult of Images in the Age Before Iconoclasm" that the first Christians accepted only the Eucharist, cross, and saintly relic as a legitimate form of religious imagery.[25] As part of the political historiography of the 1950s, he associated the rise of image veneration in the fifth and sixth centuries as part of people's desire for a security that was lacking in the wake of barbarian invasions and administrative insecurity. He related this development to the cult of the Roman Emperor's portrait dating back to Antiquity[26], and the tension between his claim to absolute political rule and accountability to a higher spiritual power. The iconoclastic controversy of the eighth century, given this political assumption, was the product of later Byzantine emperors' re-emphasis on devotion to themselves.

Historian Peter Brown is a more recent proponent of Kitzinger's approach, and offers an explanation rooted in political cohesion in "A Dark-Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy." Arguing that image crackdowns were a means of power consolidation, Brown emphasized the attempt to recreate ancient practice regarding the Eucharist and cross as the only legitimate material images for worship.[27] Venerating the images of saints might have been seen as deemphasizing trust in the power of the state at

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[25] Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age Before Iconoclasm, (Trustees for Harvard University, Dumbarton Oak Papers, Vol. 8, 1954), p. 89

[26] Kitzinger, pp. 90-91

[27] P. R. L. Brown, "A Dark-Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy," (Oxford, UK, *The English Historical Review,* 1973) p. 5.

Image from the Callistus Catacomb. Source: Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art,* (Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 226

a time when the state could least afford the political intransigence of its subjects. This makes sense in light of the more limited scope of Byzantine image destruction; imperial images are not strictly religious, and so they would be allowed to exist and provide solidarity without competition from the icons.

Kitzinger's and Brown's emphasis on the political aspect of the controversy finds contrast in Leslie Brubaker's and John Haldon's book *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680-850,* which argues that icons were not venerated on par with relics until the late seventh century.[28] Brubaker, in collaboration with John Haldon, offers insights into the view on images in the early Christian centuries appear to point out glaring discrepancies

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[28] Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c.680-850,* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 38

between the earliest Church Fathers and the Church officials of John's day. They mentioned Irenaeus's second-century masterpiece, *Against Heresies,* which condemned a woman venerating a portrait of Christ and a man venerating a similar image of John the Evangelist.[29] This was reinforced by the declarations of the late second-century Saint Clement of Alexandria and even a prohibition by the Council of Elvira.[30]

Another historian, Patricia Crone, hypothesized that the Arab invasions from the 630s onward influenced the trend to Iconoclasm.[31] According to Brubaker, however, "Byzantine iconoclasm targeted holy portraits while Palestinian iconoclasm was directed at representations of any living creature."[32] At any rate, Crone's hypothesis makes little sense given the nearly century-long gap between the earliest invasion and the first major bout of Iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire.

These authors bring up many interesting claims about the political nature of Byzantine Iconoclasm. They either overemphasized the political aspects of the controversy at the expense of the socio-cultural ones, however, or ran into problems of misinterpreting ancient writings. Sister Mary Charles Murray wrote an article in 1977 that made the case, monumental for its time, that what appeared to be condemnations of imagery for religious purposes by early Christian figures was the product of a mistranslation of the early Church languages. She started with a claim by an older historian, Ernst Renan, that Christianity was initially aniconic like Judaism, but caved

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[29] Brubaker and Haldon, p. 36

[30] Brubaker and Haldon, p. 42

[31] Patricia Crone, "Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm," from *Jersusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam,* (Hanpshire, UK, Aldershot Press 1980) pp. 60-61

[32] Leslie Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm,* (Bristol Classical Press, 2012), p.114

into pressure from an art rich Greco-Roman tradition sometime at the start of the third century.[33]

Murray cited the aforementioned evidence against total image prohibition in the Old Testament in her response to this hypothesis, an approach that corroborated John of Damascus and his Biblical citations of the materials furnished as part of the Hebrew Covenant. She furthered this approach by writing about the great Jewish catacombs of Vigna Randanini, the Villa Torlonia, and Gamart in Tunisia, which contained representations of animals, mythical creatures, and even human figures.[34] Against the charge that these catacombs contained the bodies of Jews who had been indifferent to their faith, Murray made a case for the devout practices of the Jewish community of Dura-Europos that had catacombs with similar decoration.[35]

Paul Corby Finney, in his book *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art,* picked up where Murray left off in terms of Christian attitudes towards art before the third century. He conceded that the archeological record possesses no evidence of artwork dating from earlier than this time that can be explicitly labeled as Christian in origin.[36] Finney went on to argue, however, that this absence of art in its earliest period came about because "Christians lacked land and capital. Art required both. As soon as they acquired land and capital, Christians began to experiment with their own distinct forms of art."[37] In the pages immediately preceding this claim Finney talked about the concept of culture, or *ethnos,* and how the earliest Christians were not a fully formed

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[33] Mary Charles Murray, "Art and the Early Church," *Journal of Theological Studies,* N.S. 28, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977) pp. 304-5.

[34] Murray, pp. 309-10

[35] Murray, p. 310

[36] Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God,* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 99

[37] Finney, p. 108

group in this respect. He suggested a definition of culture as requiring "land, government, economy, blood (kinship), language, religion, and *art.*"[38]

One may object to the definition, particularly with the last criterion, as circular or question begging, but Finney, on the same page, acknowledged various legitimate definitions. He supplemented his own case further by observing how in this time period Christians did not possess a distinct sacred language, nor did they dress differently from their neighbors.[39]They made no efforts to distinguish themselves other than by way of their community gatherings, belief system, and their refusal to take part in Roman civil rituals.

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[38] Finney, p. 106

[39] Finney, p. 105

Mosaic floor of the Hammat Tiberias synagogue. Source: Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years,* 2000, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, p. 211

The turn of the third century saw the first appearance of Christian art genres in the realm of the catacombs, as attested by the archeological evidence. Finney stated that the political turbulence of this new century may have enabled the Christians to gain more in terms of social power.[40] They were now able to invest in land and capital, which enabled them to secure their base for their own art style.

Finally, Charles Barber, in his book *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm,* argued that the origin of the Iconoclastic controversy lay in the realm of theology, and that imperial policy was informed by the religious discourse, not vice-versa. This, too, is more in line with the writings of John, who saw Iconoclasm as a spiritual, rather than political issue. Barber argued that the afore-mentioned Quinisext Council of 692 sparked the controversy, specifically by way of its 82nd canon.[41] Barber stated, "The implication is that how one chooses to show the Christian God has theological ramifications. The canon essentially argues that Old Testament figuration is no longer a viable Christian mode of representation."[42] The Iconoclastic controversy, then, may be partially one about the degree to which the authority of the Old Testament still stands; no easy answer exists even now. Nevertheless, the Iconoclasts' case relied on faulty assumptions about the relation of imagery to the ancient Hebrew faith.

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[40] Finney, p. 110

[41] Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm,* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 20020, p. 42

[42] Barber, p. 54

Overall, these works lend credence to John's claim to working within tradition, which carries enormous implications for how one approaches Christianity itself. The Iconoclastic Controversy did not get fully resolved during his lifetime, however. There were two phases, one lasting from roughly 726 to 787 and the second lasting from 814 to 843. John took part in the more theologically oriented defense, one that would shift to a philosophical discussion in the second wave of the controversy. Nevertheless, his writings provided a crucial push forward in discussion of an intricate matter such as icon veneration.

Contextualizing John's Approach

There is no limitation to the intricacies and complexities of a subject like the Byzantine Iconoclastic controversies, and thus it would be overambitious to characterize it as a "closed case." This is why the present thesis seeks to understand it from a more limited scope of an individual's relation to it. Through a careful analysis of the ancient and contemporary sources, however, one may arrive at certain conclusions about image making and history. The evidence as it is now available and scrutinized indicates that Saint John of Damascus was working from tradition regarding his claims about the permissibility of imagery in religious worship.

Re-readings of the sources of the ancient Church Fathers, particularly before the conversion of Constantine I, bear this out, as does the archeological evidence of ancient Jewish and early Christian catacombs. Yet John's writings were also a part of a larger paradigm of the image in relation to who it depicted, something that changed as the Iconoclastic controversy progressed. It started out with accusations of idolatry, and then shifted to a more philosophical framework touching on notions of substance and identity.

John did not settle the issue within his lifetime, but he was an important figure in the progression of the discussion on the matter.

John of Damascus, of course, was not without his factual errors and biases. The evidence in archeology and even Scripture contradicts his view of the Jews in relation to image making. Considering the careful distinction he made between veneration and worship as it supposedly occurs in the Old Testament, it is surprising that he would not consider the Jews then and in his own time to be capable of knowing the difference. This discrepancy may need to be attributed to a spirit of antisemitism that was increasingly common in John's time. In spite of such flaws, however, John's main argument- that Christian image veneration was a permissible practice from its earliest days- remains intact.

The early eighth century was an auspicious time for John to come of age, for he wrote his works at a time when Islam was beginning to organize its doctrines in a formal academic setting. According to Sidney H. Griffith, writing in his book *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam,* "Apocalypse was the earliest genre in which Christians initially expressed their most sustained response to the religious challenge to Islam..."[43]. He cites an anonymous early medieval work, entitled *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius,* that factors in the Arab invaders as punishers for Christian sins in preparation for the Last Days,[44] in conjunction with the insights of Brubaker.

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[43] Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam,* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 12

[44] Griffith, pp. 33-4

As the decades passed and it became clear that the Muslim rulers would be there to stay, John and other Christian apologists realized that a newly developed and more sophisticated apologetic would be needed to defend Christianity. This was especially salient in a time where there was growing pressure in the Muslim community to grant equal status with Arab Muslims to non-Arab converts to Islam, a campaign spearheaded by Caliph Umar II (r. 717-20).[45] Along with this difficulty was a co-option of religious terms in the Arabic language by the Islamic conquerors, "which often systematically excluded the very meanings wanted by Christians, or at the very least Muslims Islamicized the terms in a way contrary to Christian thinking."[46] One approach that was open to John of Damascus and other apologists was a defense of the Trinity in terms of the Islamic conception of God's divine attributes, namely his existence, life, and Word.[47]

One irony that may permeate the discussion at this point surrounds the theology of John vis-à-vis the various Christian communities subject to the rule of the Umayyad dynasty. According to Griffith, the aforementioned Jacobites (Monophysites) and the Nestorians did not accept all the pronouncements of the first four ecumenical councils, especially as concerned Christ's mode of being. [48] As a result, they suffered under the rule of the Orthodox Byzantine Christian political system prior to the arrival of the Arab invaders. Since John was a follower of the precepts of the Council of Chalcedon as concerned Christology and other doctrines, he might be viewed in some Christian circles as a member of an imperialist *dhimmi* group under an overarching Muslim rule.

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[45] Griffith, p. 15

[46] Griffith, p. 95

[47] Griffith, p. 95

[48] Griffith, p. 12

A full understanding of John's motivation for writing must be informed by his tendency to portray himself as a mere part of a greater whole, the monastic community. Although certainty is impossible, we can make educated conclusions about the community in which he lived regarding motives for writing against the Iconoclasts, or, for that matter, other heresies. In the case of John's writings against the Iconoclasts, an analysis of the evidence above indicates that there was actually much at stake in terms of the Orthodox Christian community's survival. John's fear of Iconoclasm was that it could ultimately lead to Manichaeism.[49]

Indeed, as indicated above, Manichaeism was one of the most serious heresies to plague the Roman Empire after the conversion of Constantine until Justinian I outlawed and suppressed it in the mid sixth century. With the rise of the Islamic Empire and its seizure of Roman territory south and east of the Mediterranean Sea, Manichaeism became one of the *dhimmi* faiths on equal par with other non-Muslim communities in Muslim territory.[50] This meant that the Orthodox Melkite communities had to develop their apologetic skills against Manichaeism and other heresies in light of their inability to use violence to suppress them.

In the case of John and his fellow monks, a failure to speak out would mean that the Manichaean mentality might subtly infiltrate all the Christian communities both inside and outside the Byzantine Empire. John implicitly voiced this worry when he writes of the Manichaeans and Gnostics as "giving glory to the devil and his demons and bringing them joy, *even though they are full of God's name.*"[51] A renunciation of the material

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[49] Anderson, p. 24

[50] Griffith, p. 42

[51] Anderson, pp. 57-58, emphasis mine

realm as such, in a worst case scenario, would entail a collapse of the established political

and social order on which Christian societies, and, *a fortiori,* monastic communities,

depended for their livelihood.

This last mentioned fear might seem like a big logical stretch, but was not

inconceivable in the apocalyptic mentality of John and his associates. The whole idea of

the Christian apocalypse, after all, is that it is an age where many would be led astray by

the Antichrist. John himself saw Islam itself as the "forerunner of the Antichrist,"[52] which

would immediately precede the final triumph of the Christian God over all that was evil.

In essence, John sensed a "double threat" in the anti-image and anti-material theology of

the Manichaeans coupled with the political hegemony of Islam, which was also not

sympathetic to the use of images in its own rites of worship.[53]

The preoccupation with the End of Days also explains the paradox of John's writing

in support of image veneration outside the regime in which the controversy was actually

occurring. "Who did John think he was," wrote Louth, "a Byzantine subject in exile, or a

subject of the Caliph?"[54] John's view of himself might correspond to the former

description, for in his writings he argues that Christians owed their allegiance to the

Emperor in matters not having to do with religion.[55] There are no corresponding writings

that are specific on allegiance to the Caliph if one were subject to his political

jurisdiction. It was also unlikely that his writings would find their way into Byzantine

lands during his lifetime. For one, the Iconoclastic Byzantine court made possession of

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[52] Louth, p. 59, cf. Griffith, p. 41-42

[53] See Louth, p. 221-22, which mentions this problem in light of one of the Islamic *hadith.*

[54] Louth, p. 205

[55] See Louth, p. 205, cf. Anderson, p. 59

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texts supporting image veneration a capital offense.[56] At any rate, border crossings would have been made difficult by the general friction between the Byzantine and Umayyad Empires.

John was thus writing in a frame of mind that did not recognize the Islamic regime as an entity that would remain for ages to come. This was in spite of the fact that the Christian communities surrounding him had begun to accept the Muslim presence as part of a new regular way of life.[57] His cloistered settings may have been a factor in this; one's impressions and writings about a certain group are often affected by how directly one interacts with them.

Aside from his fears of the effects of heresy and the Apocalyptic Age, however, there must have been a very human element of identity preservation. His family had been a Christian family for generations prior to his birth, and had lived through the conquests by and defeats of the Persians and Avars with their religious and cultural identity intact.[58] Setting aside the question of authenticity regarding the story of the severed hand, as well as the aforementioned implausibility that John's writings could have reached Byzantine lands in his lifetime, this story may contain an element of truth regarding John's sense of being out of place in the caliphal court. John, like his religious compatriots, may have started fearing that they were on a course towards religious and cultural capitulation to the Muslims.

Indeed, the trend towards mass conversion by the *dhimmis* unfolded not long after his lifetime, a result of the policies of the more ethnically inclusive Abbassid regime that

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[56] Louth, p. 198

[57] Louth, p. 155, cf. Griffith, p. 28

[58] Louth p. 5

would come to power in 750,[59] and foreshadowed as early as Caliph Umar II's reign. Such a move, in John's eyes, would have been a renunciation of what his ancestors had stood for, perhaps the ultimate spiritual death.

The power and permeation of the Islamic regime would also require a Christian response that was authoritative in tone. John managed to accomplish this in his writings precisely by defining himself as part of a collective, a mere link in a much greater whole. This serves to explain his self-deprecating tone, embodied in the portion where he declares, "I shall add nothing of my own,"[60] in the introduction to *The Fount of Knowledge.*

The preface to *St. John of Damascus: Writings,* suggests that a prohibition against writing in the Monastery of St. Sabbas in Jerusalem may have been a factor. According to the source, the abbot nearly expelled John from the monastery for violating this rule in order to write verses for the deceased brother of a fellow monk.[61] He was made to clean the latrines until a purported image of the Virgin Mary appeared to the abbot asking him to lift the restriction on John.

While this may have been a proximate factor in the style of John's introduction to his writings, the political atmosphere that influenced monasteries such as St. Sabbas to have such a rule is of greater interest. As mentioned above, in order for Christian belief to be maintained against an Islamic encroachment, the monks needed to present the doctrines of the Church as originating from Christ himself. To admit or state that any portion of their deposit of faith was of recent innovation would be fatal to this enterprise. The initial

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[59] For more details on demographics in the lands incorporated under Islamic rule between 650 and 870, see Richard W. Bulliet's *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History,* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. xi, 158

[60] Chase, p. 6

[61] Chase, p. viii

restraints imposed upon John may very well have been a safeguard to ensure that he did not carelessly write anything that could endanger this sense of doctrinal solidarity.

Image of the Virgin Mary, Christchild, and angels, seventh or eighth century, Santa Maria in Trastavere, Rome. Source: Barber, *Figure and Likeness,* p. 28

John's promise to "add nothing of [his] own," however, can be read in nuanced ways. John's writings, according to Chase, *are* innovative in their approach to philosophy as a basis for studying Christian belief and practice.[62] He insists that John was original in the sense that his works synthesize, rather than merely compile, older writings. There is no record, though, of John's superiors feeling any sense of alarm at this approach. Indeed,

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[62] Chase, p. xxvi

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they would have found it helpful, for it permitted a more articulate defense of Christianity against followers of Islam and other faiths with great political power behind their backs.

The above quote, then, was John's promise to maintain the orthodox tradition within his own writings for the sake of his brothers in faith. It was a discipline that paid off; his writings continue to be an authoritative deposit of doctrine, in both the Eastern and Western Churches, to this day.[63]

Work in Progress

Although John's writings are considered monumental in the field of icon defense, he was but one link in an ongoing evolution of Iconophile discourse. Even a cursory reading of the history of Byzantine Iconoclasm indicates that there was not one but two phases that plagued the Empire. As mentioned earlier, John wrote during the first phase, which spanned roughly the mid 720s to around 787, and the second lasted roughly from 814 to 843, well after John's death.

These time brackets are significant because the objections upon which the iconoclasts based their case changed between the two eras. John wrote his works in a time, and as a reaction to, the initial charge that image making was a form of idolatry. His defense of Church practice can be summed up in his work *On the Divine Images,* in which he states, "If you speak of pagan abuses, these abuses do not make our veneration of images loathsome. Blame the pagans, who made images into gods!"[64] The careful distinction John made between *proskynesis* and *latreia* invalidated this approach, as well as his assertion that the Incarnation superseded the injunction against portraying God. It raised the question of the degree to which the Old Testament, with its themes of prophecy

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[63] See Chase, pp. xxxv-xxxviii for a history of the many translations of John's works

[64] Anderson p. 32

and prefiguration, still held authority in relation to the New Testament premise of "fullness of revelation."

According to Barber, the terms of the ninth-century Iconoclasts' objections centered more on "the relationship between *what* is represented and *how* it is represented."[65] Their argument moved beyond a mere theological or Trinitarian discourse into a more philosophical discussion on essence and identity. According to this new generation of iconoclasts, an icon could only be said to be an image of Christ if there was a sameness of essence between the prototype and his depiction. Barber took note of their codification of this argument using the example of the Eucharist.[66] In Catholic and Orthodox Christian belief, the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ upon consecration by a priest. As per the Iconoclasts' insistence, it is a true icon since it transforms from "a thing made by human hands to a thing not made by human hands"[67] and captures both Christ's human and divine natures. A painted icon, even if not a *willful* exercise in idolatry, could never share in the essence of Christ since it cannot capture his invisible divine nature.

According to Barber, this development in the Iconoclasts' case forced a corresponding shift in the Iconophiles' defense that moved the discourse beyond theology and into the realm of secular (particularly Aristotelian) philosophical terminology. He cites the writings of ninth-century figures such as Patriarch Nikephoros and Patriarch Photios who iterate the ancient Aristotelian categories of material, efficient, formal, and final cause. Even though John of Damascus was dead by this time, these two men drew

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[65] Barber, *Figure and Likeness*, p. 77, emphasis in the original
[66] Barber, pp. 79-80
[67] Barber, pp. 79-80

from his legacy. John himself had written more philosophically inclined treatises that dealt with substance and form in his *Fount of Knowledge.*[68] Although John did not emphasize these aspects of his writings when arguing for the permissibility of image veneration, these philosophical portions of his work laid the foundation for argument in the area of the philosophical.

Both Nikephoros and Photios acknowledged the distinction in essence between the icon and the one depicted, but that the icon was still "a truthful medium for the knowledge of the holy *because* of this manufactured status."[69] The connection is not a material connection, but a formal one:

> For Nikephoros, painting cannot divide that which it
> represents because painting is distinct from what it
> represents. An image pertains only to Christ's visible
> aspects; it does not claim to include the invisible and
> divine aspects of Christ. Given this, the position put
> forward by Constantine is misplaced, as it is based upon
> too broad an understanding of what painting may do.
> In these terms, Nikephoros is proposing that the artist
> is right to call his icon Christ, as the icon is indeed an
> icon of Christ *in so far as* it can be an icon of Christ.
> Painting Christ neither divides him nor limits him,
> because painting is simply a record of his visible traits.[70]

Given these insights into the relation between the visual and the divine, one may wonder why the Iconoclasts never extrapolated their case to other ways of portraying Jesus. The Gospel passages, for example, teem with quotations from Christ, and the quotations were and still are uttered along with the rest of the text when the lector reads them for services. A case against portraying Christ visually would seem to be an equally

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[68] See, for example, Chase, pp. 63-66

[69] Barber, p. 115, emphasis in the original

[70] Barber, p. 113, emphasis in the original

valid case against "portraying" Him aurally when reading quotes attributed to Him, yet no Iconoclast has been documented arguing in this fashion.

Ironically, the Iconoclasts' veneration of the cross, which Kitzinger rightly noted was considered an acceptable symbol, became the basis for later Iconophiles' arguments in support of showing the figure of Christ and the saints. Barber once more cited Patriarch Nikephoros, who argued that the term *figure* is equally applicable to the visual representation of the cross and the body of Christ. The full excerpt cited is lengthy, but the key argument, according to Barber's analysis, is that "Christ's body is that which gives value to the form of the cross. If one refuses veneration of the body, then one renders meaningless any veneration of that which depends upon this body, namely the cross."[71] Since the cross was given its present Christian significance by Christ's suffering on it, and since Christ was greater than the cross, then, the argument goes, Christ's depiction was warranted.

By justifying the depiction of Christ in terms of form and image, John and other defenders of icon usage could extend their argument to depictions of the Virgin Mary and the saints: "If you make an image of Christ, and not of the saints, it is evident that you do not forbid images, but refuse to honor the saints. You make images of Christ as one who is glorified, yet you deprive the saints of their rightful glory, and call truth falsehood."[72] Indeed, their case was easier with these figures, since the thorny factor of Divinity did not apply to them. This made the way for settled cultural acceptance of the Christian image, at all levels of society, in the Byzantine world up to its collapse at the hands of the Ottomans in 1453.

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[71] Barber, p. 102

[72] Anderson, p. 26

Concluding Remarks

To speak meaningfully of John of Damascus and his writings against Iconoclasm necessitates discussion of his allies, detractors, and historiographers. He would have found this quite fitting, owing to his insistence on a collectivist mentality. How we view his writings is inevitably influenced by the way we understand the ancient sources, an understanding which has undergone drastic change over the course of a mere century.

The recent scholarship of Mary Charles Murray, Paul Corby Finney, and Charles Barber warrants the conclusion that John was working from a tradition that stretched unbroken back to at least the turn of the third century CE. The writings against image making are now understood as being in reference to idolatry, and were not meant as a categorical condemnation. Indeed, the Scriptural evidence could not allow for such a sweeping opposition, given the instances of licit image making among the ancient Hebrews.

Historiography, of course, does not happen in a pristine bubble; perhaps this thesis is relevant for reminding any potential historiographer to be aware of their presuppositions, especially in the interpretation of ancient sources. Finney argues that the work of twentieth-century aniconic theorists simply follows in the tradition of the anti-image polemicists of Byzantium and the sixteenth-century Calvinists misrepresentation of the ancient sources.[73] Many of the historians of the early twentieth century, if not confessing Calvinists, nevertheless relied blindly on sources that cannot, by an impartial examination, be seen as objective in their approach. Kitzinger, et al,, in other words, rely on a now outmoded approach to history that downplays the importance of the original

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[73] Anderson, pp. 4-10

language of the writings; this is especially relevant in the translation of ancient texts from Greek to Latin. Murray's work in the 1970s was the beginning of the move from that approach.

As far as the present evidence goes, however, John of Damascus was right in his claim that image veneration was a practice permissible from the earliest days of Christianity. He took care to distinguish this from idolatrous usage, and made strategic use of the evidence in his favor. He was thus a pivotal figure in the clarification of Church doctrine, even though he involved himself in a subject that may seem trivial to many people in modern times. His efforts, and the efforts of other writers like him, have made a difference in the cultural artifacts that exist and can be appreciated today. The monumental subject of Iconoclasm, lying so far in the past, nevertheless exemplifies a fusion of religion, art, historiography, and general culture that makes for the complex yet meaningful nature of historical inquiry.

Image of John of Damascus, Skete of St. Anne, early fourteenth century. Source: Louth, *St. John Damascene,* frontispiece

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