

Expound critically the Christological and ontological dimensions of the iconoclastic debate. In addition, explain how iconoclasm was a doctrinal issue to a great extent, and not just a disagreement over religious art.

The iconoclastic debate evolved through a couple of major stages.¹ The early debate was focused primarily on the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, which prohibited images,² while the later debate was much more focused on Christological grounds, which were more about the circumscribability of Christ than about divine commandments.³ The defences raised against iconoclasm focus on the Incarnation,⁴ the heart of Christology, and with this, especially in the latter period, the distinction between nature and person.⁵ This latter problem was, and still is, a root cause of most heresies. It seems that mankind really struggles to understand and maintain this important distinction.

Because the debate became a Christological debate many of the arguments revisited areas that were previously addressed in the earlier Councils, with which both sides claimed to be consistent.⁶ This paper will consider these Christological and ontological issues and how the arguments of both sides relate to the doctrine of the Incarnation as held in the earlier Ecumenical Councils. The work of St Theodore the Studite will be used as a framework for this essay and the issues will be addressed in the same order that he addresses them in his “Third Refutation of the Iconoclasts.” Then, some of the answers will be examined in terms of Trinitarian theology, including later issues of the distinction between essence and energies and even the filioque. Consideration will also be made of the implications of icons for how man relates to God, participates in His Life and for man’s salvation. Finally, there will an explanation of how iconoclasm was a doctrinal issue and not just a debate about religious art.

¹ Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 219.

² Exodus 20:4.

³ Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, p. 219.

⁴ Ibid., and Seventh Ecumenical Council, ‘The Doctrine of the Veneration of Icons’, in Gennadios Limouris, *Icons: Windows on Eternity, Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva, WCC Publications: 1990), p. 1.

⁵ Leonid Ouspensky, (Anthony Gythiel, trans.) *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood, NY:SVS Press, 1992), Volume 1, p. 125.

⁶ Ambrosios Giakalis, *Images of the Divine: The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1994), pp. 10, 97.

The earlier defence of icons by St John of Damascus centred on the Incarnation⁷. The reasoning was that because God became man we could make images of Him because He was no longer invisible.⁸ The commandment against images was not applicable because the image of the Incarnate was neither of the invisible God in the heavens nor of something merely of the earth both of which the commandment correctly continues to prohibit.⁹ The Incarnation brought in something new that transcended the commandment, which had served its purpose to prevent the Israelites from falling into idolatry.¹⁰ Even in the Old Testament, God had either commanded, or permitted, the use of images, such as the Cherubim over the Ark,¹¹ so it was clear that images were not forbidden in themselves but only images that would lead men to idolatry and forget the transcendent immateriality of God.¹²

This defence was later rejected by the iconoclasts on Christological grounds concerning the understanding of Christ that would result if we can draw images of the Incarnate Son of God. The iconoclasts agreed, as set down by the Fourth Ecumenical Council, that Christ has two natures one of God and one of Man. However, they argued that we cannot draw an image of Christ's divine nature because this is not circumscribable. So, the image could only be of the human nature and hence it would divide Christ resulting in a form of Nestorianism.¹³ Christ could not be portrayed as the God-man in an icon. The iconoclasts saw an icon as a representation of the natures of Christ:

“If Christ is of two natures, when you claim to portray Him why do you not portray both natures from which and in which He is, if you are speaking the truth? But since one of the two is falsified, because the human circumscription does not contain the uncircumscribability of the divine nature, it is heretical to circumscribe Christ.”¹⁴

⁷ Leslie Barnard, 'The Theology of Images', in Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin, (eds.) *Iconoclasm* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1977), p. 8.

⁸ St John of Damascus, (David Anderson, trans.) *On the Divine Images* (Crestwood, NY:SVS Press, 1980), pp. 18, 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

¹³ Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, Volume 1, p. 124.

¹⁴ St Theodore the Studite, *On Holy Icons* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1981).

“If Christ were a mere man,” they say, “He would be circumscribable; for circumscription is characteristic of a mere man. But since He is not a mere man (for He is both God and man), He is not circumscribable either.”¹⁵

This argument carries some weight because the argument from the Incarnation was that because Christ now had a human nature, He could be depicted in an icon. Thus, it was His human nature that allowed the depiction. However, the iconoclasts responded, this still does not permit His divine nature to be depicted and it could not be the complete Christ depicted in such an image.

However, as St Theodore the Studite argues in his refutation of the iconoclasts, the iconoclasts are confusing nature (such as human nature or essence) and person (hypostasis, a unique instance of an essence such as St Peter).¹⁶ They are not allowing that each nature maintains its proper properties and yet Christ remains one person (hypostasis). Also, the reason used to deny icons would also mean the denial of the Incarnation. How so? The iconoclasts assume that it is the nature that is portrayed in the icon and that the icon can only represent Christ if both His natures are somehow represented on the icon because he has two natures.¹⁷ Hence, the iconoclasts claim that because the divine nature cannot be represented then it cannot be Christ who is represented in the icon but merely a man. St Theodore’s response is that it is not the nature that an icon represents but the person (hypostasis).¹⁸ Yes, the person is represented because the human nature allows this but it is not the human nature itself that is represented as human nature but a unique hypostasis of that nature with its distinguishing features that identify it with that unique hypostasis. Thus, Christ is able to be portrayed because He too has such distinguishing features that identify His hypostasis from all the others of human nature.¹⁹ The nature provides properties that enable one to identify a particular hypostasis and that is Christ, the Son of God, Who became man. The non-portrayal of His divine nature has no relevance to the fact that His hypostasis can be identified and portrayed by its features as Him. If this were not so then He could not have been known in His Incarnation on earth because His body, which all saw, could only be seen if it was that of a mere human person and not the hypostasis of the Son of God, which could not be seen without circumscribing His divinity.²⁰

¹⁵ St Theodore, *On the Holy Icons*, p. 93.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

This is not the testimony of the Scriptures. Christ is both circumscribed as man and uncircumscribed as God.

It can be seen from St Theodore's defence of icons that the distinction between person and nature lies at the heart of the matter and he returns to this repeatedly in response to the various arguments of the iconoclasts, as will be seen below. Some have also considered that because of the failure to make this distinction, the iconoclasts were falling into the Monophysite heresy, which confuses or merges the two natures into one nature, even if they claimed to be denying this.²¹

The iconoclasts nevertheless also raised the issue that an icon is an artificial image and not the true image of Christ's humanity thus the connection between His circumscribability in the flesh and that of an icon does not hold. Only a natural image of Christ, such as the Eucharist, can be said to be permitted of Him.²² This raises the issue of how is the icon connected to Christ? What is it that joins the image to its archetype and permits us to say that it is His image?

The response to this problem was that if it is possible to have an artificial image of any human being such as portrait on a coin then it is possible to have an image of Christ. Just as He is the natural image of His mother, of the same nature, He too has an artificial image of a different nature as does she.²³ The connection of the artificial image to the archetype is based on likeness to the archetype. It identifies the same hypostasis. The connection is not because it is the same nature as the archetype.²⁴ Because Christ has identifying features as a human these can be artificially replicated in an icon to represent the hypostasis that is unique to Him. To deny this would be to deny Him being a unique and real human being and thus leave His Incarnation as a mirage or fantasy,²⁵ which again returns to earlier ideas that were regarded as heretical such as Docetism.²⁶

Part of the response is that whenever there is a prototype there must also be an image. (This only applies to those prototypes that are circumscribed, such as humans.) St Theodore refers to the

²¹ cf. Hans Belting, (Edmund Jephcott, trans.) *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Icon before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 147, who notes that Constantine V sympathised with the Monophysites on similar grounds, and Barnard, 'The Theology of Images', p. 12-13.

²² Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, p. 132.

²³ St Theodore, *On the Holy Icons*, pp. 99-101.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁶ Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, Volume 1, p. 146.

Lord's words: "Whose is this image and inscription?"²⁷ to support his point but it is hard to see from them why there must be an image of a prototype. These words fit well with the earlier part of his argument referring to an image to its prototype and so it may be better to say that he leaves unexplained the necessity of each prototype having an image, as something given. The argument that there must be an image for each prototype could be understood to be including the potential of a prototype's image and that there does not need to exist an actualised artificial image, i.e. portrait, of everyone having a natural image. This is a point that St Theodore makes later in his arguments.²⁸ The potential is assumed to be the same as an actual image because whether an image is actualised is a matter of circumstances but not of its inherent properties. Indeed, the concept of prototype in itself only has meaning if there is an image of that prototype, at least in potential, because without an artificial image there could be no prototype.²⁹ It would be meaningless to talk of prototypes without images. However, why a circumscribed form must be a prototype is another issue. Does Christ need to be a prototype? One positive solution to this could be found in that any object that can be seen, i.e. that has an image, must also have an artificial image otherwise the viewer would not see that image. To see a prototype image requires the creation of an another physical image in the eye of the viewer, which is what the viewer really 'sees' rather than the matter of the prototype itself because the brain translates this image into information that it can recognise as vision. Hence, if an artificial image can be created in the eye and brain then an artificial painted image or photographic image can also be made of the prototype. Also, if something is visible then it must have an artificial image, otherwise it would be invisible to any physical beholder. Therefore, to deny an artificial image is to deny the prototype's visibility and circumscribable existence. So, if it is possible to see Christ then it is possible to paint Him.

Here again is the importance of the distinction between nature and person (hypostasis). Also, it shows how the person can unite different natures, that they find their unity in the person (hypostasis) even when they are different in essence thus reinforcing the full meaning of the doctrines of the Incarnation. Again, to deny the ability to make an artificial image of Christ is to misinterpret the Incarnation and deny that Christ is truly God and truly man.

Given that there could be an artificial image of Christ, the iconoclasts argued that the veneration of that image would amount to idolatry because the image falls short in complete equality with the

²⁷ St Theodore, *On the Holy Icons*, p. 101.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

prototype, being different in essence, so the veneration would differ between the prototype and the image.³⁰ This is based on the idea that things of different essences must be venerated at different levels. An icon is not the same essence as Christ so it cannot be venerated in the same way. If it cannot be venerated the same way then there must be a different veneration and hence a form of idolatry because it is not the veneration of God. This has merit if one is to understand that an icon is venerated in itself as a material object. Another aspect of this argument is that the Son is venerated the same as the Father because they have the same essence but because an icon does not have the same essence, it cannot receive the same veneration.

St Theodore begins his response again by distinguishing between person and essence. It is not the essence of the icon that is venerated, i.e. the icon as a material object is not venerated, it is the prototype (person or hypostasis), of whom the icon is an image, to whom the veneration is given.³¹ The icon points to the person and the veneration passes to that person, so it is the same veneration whether provided before an icon or before the prototype because it is the same person being venerated in both cases. Icons of different prototypes (hypostases) may receive different veneration because of the different prototypes (hypostases) depicted in the icons. All icons are not given the same veneration because they are of the same material nor is one icon given greater veneration than another because it is a mosaic rather than being painted on wood.³² Even if the image is poorly executed and bears a poor likeness of the prototype one may still use it because there are enough similarities that enable the prototype to be identified.

An important distinction is also made between the veneration that each of the Trinity receives and that of an icon of Christ. Each distinct hypostasis of the Trinity receives the same veneration (properly worship) because they have the same essence.³³ However, Christ and His icon receive the same veneration because they have the same hypostasis even though there is a difference in essence.³⁴ In both cases there is a difference of some aspect but the same veneration, so a difference in one aspect does not diminish the veneration if there is a similarity in another aspect.³⁵ Another example is the emperor and his image. The image is given the same honour as due to the emperor in

³⁰ St Theodore, *On the Holy Icons*, p. 110.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, p. 82-83.

³⁴ St Theodore, *On the Holy Icons*, p. 106.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

person because it shares his hypostatic image. Also, each emperor is given the same honour even with a different hypostasis because they are the same in being an emperor.³⁶

Yet another argument brought forward by the iconoclasts is that it is superfluous to depict Christ in an icon because His image is sufficiently seen in Himself.³⁷

St Theodore's response to this is very interesting. He argues that the image must be transferred into some material for the prototype to be called a prototype.³⁸ Even a man is not a man unless he is portrayed in some way. This is a bold claim that Christ's humanity would be deficient if not somehow portrayed. He would even lose His humanity if this were not done. So, not only Christ can have an image, He must have an image and wouldn't be human without such an image. St Theodore qualifies himself by saying that even if the image does not appear it is still with Him in potential and cannot fail to be imprinted on some material.³⁹ If this were not permitted or possible then He would not be human.

Yet, many people are born and die without someone painting them or taking a photograph of them. Are they not human? Surely they are; the reason would be that the creation of an image is a potential aspect of their humanity but it is not a necessity, see earlier reasons above. In Trinitarian theology, the Son is the exact image of the Father's hypostasis.⁴⁰ This image has always been with the Father and of the same essence, yet distinct.⁴¹ Thus, God, the Father, is a prototype with an eternal image, the Son. If this is the case then it may not be wrong to understand that creation reflects this Trinitarian ontology. This would support then the position of St Theodore that prototypes have an image and the necessity that that image is displayed. The sense of the image being in potential is also something that can be traced back into the doctrine of Creation. Man is an image of God within a material form. (This does not mean that God has some circumscribable form but that it is nevertheless possible to embody the image of God without it ceasing to be the image of God.) Yet, this material form was not eternally existent in God but existed as a potential creation

³⁶ St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, p. 36, commenting on Chapter 18 of St Basil the Great's work on the Holy Trinity.

³⁷ St Theodore, *On the Holy Icons*, pp. 111-112.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ cf. Hebrews 1:3.

⁴¹ cf. Alain Besancan, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), pp. 84-85.

through the eternal image of the Son.⁴² Thus, the material production of an image of Christ in His human form exists as a potential in Him. This image needs to be produced to confirm the reality of his Incarnation. To prevent or deny the possibility of representing Him as an image is to deny both His own Incarnation as a real material event and even more to deny that man, as both soul and body, is created in the image of God and thus make it impossible for man to share in the Trinitarian life through union with the archetype of Christ.⁴³ Such a denial would permanently divorce any possibility of the union of matter with spiritual and condemn all creation to non-existence.⁴⁴

There is also an interesting aspect about knowing involved with these issues. Findings in quantum physics show that the reality of that situation is in a sense dependant on observation. This seems to be a strange phenomenon but there is some theological support for this. Knowledge of something requires some form of distinct image of that thing being made by the observer whether it is spiritual, sensory, conceptual or pictorial. Existence does not have any meaning unless it is relational and hence hypostatic. That is unless something relates to something else, or at least relates to itself, it is no different from being non-existent. Knowing oneself is only possible if there is a distinction between the self and the knowledge of the self. We can see this in what we know of the Trinity where the Son is begotten eternally as the Image of God, the exact representation of His hypostasis that can be understood as the enhypostatised image of God's knowledge of Himself, distinct and yet united as one from one source, not merely a conceptual knowledge but a living and full expression of all that God is. God exists in relationship as person (hypostasis) and persons (hypostases) not merely as essence nor as an object or thing nor as merely energy or action. All Creation exists because it is known by God. If God did not know it then it would not exist. This is reflected in our salvation with both the expressions "depart from me because I do not know you" and also "remember me in your Kingdom" pointing to the idea of knowing as part of salvation and being. Thus, an icon is a testimony of this knowledge for material/visible existence of a person. It is necessary to portray Christ because He is so known and exists. The Saints and Angels are also so represented and the scenes of His Life are shown to have been materially existing through icons. The icon works because knowledge is relational; it is hypostatic.⁴⁵ The portrayal of the hypostasis is what is required to affirm the knowledge and relationship of the hypostasis. For this purpose the

⁴² Besancan, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, pp. 89-90.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

⁴⁴ cf. Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, Volume 1, p. 146-48.

⁴⁵ Gennadios Limouris, 'The Microcosm and Macrocosm of the Icon', in Gennadios Limouris, *Icons: Windows on Eternity, Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva, WCC Publications: 1990), p. 103.

variance of essence is not relevant to the knowledge of the hypostasis. A failure to have icons is a denial of knowledge, a denial of hypostasis and hence a denial of existence.⁴⁶ Hence, St Theodore's strong words.

All the arguments above are centred around doctrinal issues and not about art itself. The reasons for iconoclasm followed earlier heresies based on the same failure to distinguish person and nature. This is the reason that the Sunday of Orthodoxy, was instituted after the final revival of icons in 843 AD not only as a feast to celebrate icons but one that remembers the preservation of the whole Orthodox faith and teaching.⁴⁷ The defence of icons is a theological matter that requires the distinction between person (hypostasis) and nature (essence) to allow the union of the image with its prototype even when the icon is of another nature than the prototype. There is also the need, which became a major issue later, for the distinction between essence and energies. There is a presence of the hypostasis in its icon. The icon is not only a reminder of the person depicted as an aid to memory, or to teaching, but it is more than this. It is the real presence of the hypostasis in the image to which it is united. Yet, this presence is the problem that the iconoclasts have in that they consider that presence to be that of the essence of the prototype. Such a presence they would say is impossible with a material icon and so any such understanding of an icon must be false and any veneration would be idolatry. The iconoclast could accept an icon as merely a reminder of someone or some event but to venerate the icon would imply the presence of the prototype, which is impossible and so forbidden. The answer to this problem is to maintain the distinction between essence and energies. Thus, Christ is present in His icon not in essence but in His energies. This presence is reinforced, or rather established, by the Holy Spirit, Who is present in the icons of Christ and of the Saints from whom He does not depart even after death.⁴⁸ The Holy Spirit rests on the hypostasis of the Son and all that is connected to this hypostasis including His humanity, the Holy Gifts, and through communion all the Saints baptised into Him, and also icons of Him. (This also associates the filioque controversy and the doctrines involved with icons.) It is the energies rather than the essence that connect the prototype to the image because of the hypostatic likeness, make the prototype present in the image and to enable a venerator to participate in this presence, all in the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹ Through the energies the veneration passes through to the prototype.⁵⁰ So, it is

⁴⁶ cf. Giakalis, *Images of the Divine* p. 76-78.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 136 and Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, Volume 1, pp.134, 146-150.

⁴⁸ St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, p. 27.

⁴⁹ Giakalis, *Images of the Divine* p. 121.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 126.

possible to have the veneration of an icon without the icon becoming an idol because the icon is not venerated nor worshipped in itself but only as a portal to the hypostasis to whom the veneration or worship is due⁵¹.

This perhaps explains why in the West, where the distinction between essence and energies has not been maintained, icons have only been seen in a role as reminders, as a means of teaching.⁵² Although there is an acceptance of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the full implications of the council have not been incorporated into the life of the churches.⁵³ By Eastern standards the Western Christians are, at least partly, iconoclasts, even when they use images in churches and at home.⁵⁴ One of the signs of this lack of incorporation, theology and veneration of icons is how these images are displayed. Because of the close connection of the likeness of the icon with its prototype there is a need for care in how the image is drawn.⁵⁵ It needs to be a true likeness of the prototype. Also, because the icon is not merely a vision of the human nature of the prototype divorced from the divine nature or energies it is not a naturalistic image but something representing the deification of the human nature, that it participates in the divine; the halo of the glory of the uncreated light is one key aspect of this representation.⁵⁶ However, the artistic freedom and naturalistic images that one finds in Western religious art from the Renaissance onwards show how the understanding of the icon has been divorced from its true meaning and has become something that the iconoclasts would either accept or that both the iconoclasts and iconophiles could be justified in condemning as idolatry. Perhaps, this even is part of the explanation of Protestant iconoclasm as being in response to what would be considered idolatry, even by iconophiles, or as more consistently expressing the real iconoclastic tendencies already present in Western thinking.⁵⁷ Although, the main cause of Protestant iconoclasm may be explained with the association of revelation of the Word with

⁵¹ Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, p. 122.

⁵² Paul Evdokimov (Fr Steven Bigham, trans.) *The Art of the Icon: a theology of beauty* (Redondo Beach: Oakwood Publications, 1990), p. 167-169.

⁵³ Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, Volume 2, p. 216-7.

⁵⁴ cf. Georg Kretschmar, 'The Reformation and the Theology of Images', in Gennadios Limouris (ed.), *Icons: Windows on Eternity, Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva, WCC Publications: 1990), pp. 80-81.

⁵⁵ Limouris, 'The Microcosm and Macrocosm of the Icon', p. 1.

⁵⁶ Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: a theology of beauty*, p. 169.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

Scripture and hence the impossibility of using images. At least this was Calvin's position.
⁵⁸Lutherans, following Martin Luther, do not oppose images but do not venerate them either.⁵⁹

The presence of the prototype in the icon and the connection by means of the divine energies is important theologically because it also confirms that matter can participate in the Life of God.⁶⁰ If this was not the case then matter would be divorced from divinity. If matter is divorced from divinity then it calls into question the salvation of man as a psycho-somatic whole.⁶¹ Not only this, it calls into question the possibility of the creation of matter. If matter cannot participate in the life of God then, if it exists, it must have a life or existence that is completely separate from God. Yet, there is no existence or life beyond that of God because it must otherwise have its own life and eternal being as another god. This is impossible if God is one and without limit. So, all existence must participate in the Life of God in some manner. This is not by essence otherwise it must be God, so it is through the energies of God in the Spirit as *logoi* in the Logos. The theology of the icon confirms this and to deny this would be to deny Creation or to raise Creation to the level of God.

From the arguments of St Theodore, and those before and after him, it is clear that after the Incarnation the icon becomes essential. The creation of images, or icons, is excluded, although not entirely, in Ten Commandments to show that we cannot 'see' the uncircumscribable divinity and neither should we venerate creation in itself.⁶² However, when Christ became Incarnate then we can know that matter participates in the Divine Life through union with the Son of God and by the energies. Icons then become not only permissible but necessary to proclaim and realise this truth for all. Nevertheless, it is still an aspect of faith because the icons are an imitation of the prototype and not the prototype himself. They are drawn in the belief of the reality of the prototype to whom they bear a likeness but they are not the appearance of the prototype himself directly. Thus, those venerating icons are still walking in faith and not in appearance. The word 'appearance' is to be understood in this context not as the prototype's appearance in an icon but as the direct appearance of the prototype himself.⁶³

⁵⁸ Kretschmar, 'The Reformation and the Theology of Images', p. 80.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁶⁰ Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, p. 137.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137 and St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, p. 61.

⁶² St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, p. 52.

⁶³ St Theodore, *On the Holy Icons*, p. 113.

To reduce the iconoclastic debate to a disagreement about religious art is not only to miss the theological dimensions of the debate, which, as shown above, are extensive and in a way summative of all previous and even later theological debates, but also to inadvertently make a theological statement that is effectively iconoclastic. The icons are a theological statement and not only in a conceptual manner. They are a living participation in theology that echoes the phrase “theology is prayer”. Theology is thus a participation in the Life of God and icons are an important aspect of this participation. Theology is not only a conceptual and intellectual pursuit but also something that is understood from the participation of the whole man in the Life of Christ. This is chiefly done through the Liturgical life of the Church and hence the central location of icons in the Church and the importance of the iconostasis that testifies to this participation. The Sanctuary (Bema) is the Holy of Holies, it represents the dwelling of God Himself and His presence. This presence is most suitably ‘seen’ through the icons that are in the iconostasis because they portray the hypostasis of the Son, through whom we ‘see’ the Father.⁶⁴ The icons are not only of Christ alone but all the saints and particularly the Theotokos who all participate in His Life. It also focuses the fact that Heaven is this Life and not just a place or object. We do not look at the Bema to see a place but to see persons. Thus it is not a problem for Orthodox that the Bema is separated by the iconostasis but rather the iconostasis is essential to declare the correct theological understanding of the Bema and of participating in the service.⁶⁵ The Western desire to see what is happening in the Bema is not reflective of Orthodox spirituality but points rather to a priority of intellectual curiosity about place and objects rather than a real engagement with persons, especially Christ. The iconostasis does not exclude the laity but rather includes them.

Through this essay there has been a consideration of the Christological and ontological aspects of icons. The arguments of the iconoclasts, as they were understood and presented by St Theodore the Studite, have been expounded with his responses. From this exposition, it is clear that many of the iconoclastic arguments reflect a misunderstanding of the theology of the Ecumenical Councils, even though the iconoclasts insisted on being faithful to these Councils. The important theological and Christological distinction between person (hypostasis) and nature (or essence) is something that the iconoclasts consistently failed to make in their arguments. St Theodore returns repeatedly to this distinction to refute these arguments.

⁶⁴ John 14:9

⁶⁵ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1996), p. 62.

The truth of the Incarnation, and all its implications for our salvation, is also involved with this debate to the extent that not only are icons permitted but that they are essential to Christian life and liturgy. Confirming the veneration of icons also confirms the distinction between essence and energies and the necessity of making this distinction for the correct understanding of our salvation. Man can truly participate in the divine nature (life) without being already God, without being totally absorbed by God and ceasing to exist as a unique psycho-somatic whole, or without denying God and falling into atheism.

So, icons are not just a particular form of religious art but the presence and testimony of the deification of humanity and our salvation in Christ. They proclaim and make real the Incarnation and are part of the mystery of the Church that unites us to Christ. To deny them is a denial of the Faith and salvation, so rightly the feast of Orthodoxy is correctly a celebration of icons and of the entire Orthodox Faith, which is summed up in the theology of the icon.

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