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Three Treatises On The Divine Images (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press Popular Patristics Series)



Synopsis

In AD 726, the Byzantine emperor ordered the destruction of all icons, or religious images, throughout the empire, and icons were subject to an imperial ban that was to last, with a brief remission, until AD 843. A defender of icons, St John of Damascus wrote three treatises against "those who attack the holy images." He differentiates between the veneration of icons, which is a matter of expressing honor, and idolatry, which is offering worship to something other than God.

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Customer Reviews

When Christians began destroying all sorts of religious images in the 8th century, St. John of Damascus put pen to paper to defend their practice, and anyone who wishes to say that Christians who use images in worship are idolators must first deal with this book. He makes three basic arguments. First, he points out they did not worship images, but revere them as a window or pointer towards a heavenly reality, much like how most Christians would treat the printed Word (the book itself is not sacred, the messages contained in it are). Secondly, the use of images is not only not forbidden in the Old Testament, but is actually commanded (the Ark, for instance, or the bronze serpent). Thus, only "idols" are forbidden, not images (actually, it is the word "eidol" in the Septuagint that St. John would have used). Third, when God became man, He effectively gave us an image, Himself. To deny that images have a valid place in worship is to deny the Incarnation of Christ, and the Trinity is the very heart of Christianity. St. John the Damascene makes these arguments bluntly and succinctly. He believed that he was holding up the traditional view of

Christianity, and he did this in Syria, then controlled by Islam which forbids the use of images. His defence made him unwelcome in the Empire and it placed him at odds with a core teaching of his rulers. Given that he thus risked his life to write these, Christians should give him a firm hearing.

When the Byzantine emperor Leo III sided with the iconoclasts and ordered the destruction of images he came into direct conflict with the traditions of the church. St. John of Damascus risked livelihood and life to publicly denounce the iconoclasts and Leo by name in these 3 treatises. The first treatise seems an immediate from-the-hip response, the second is provided to expound on some of the ideas that some readers/hearers might have misunderstood, the third is a more detailed and thorough response to iconoclasm and church authority in general. St. John takes on the iconoclasts from several directions. With respect to their use of scriptural prohibitions against images, St. John responds with church tradition as the guide to interpreting scripture and challenges those who would "remove the ancient boundaries, set in place by our fathers" [Prov 22:28]. He reminds his listeners several times in these sermons that, "Not only has the ordinance of the Church been handed down in writings, but also in unwritten traditions." And ends the first sermon on that theme with, "Therefore I entreat the people of God, the holy nation, to cling to the traditions of the Church. " Referring to Ezek 20:25 in light of Matt 19:7-8 with Heb 1:1-3, St. John says, "And I say to you, that Moses, on account of the hardness of heart of the sons of Israel, ordered them not to make images, for he knew their tendency to slip into idolatry. But now it is not so; we stand securely on the rock of faith enriched by the light of knowledge of God." The authority of the church to interpret scripture based on the sacred tradition is without doubt in John's eyes. It is a direct challenge to those in John's day (and ours) who would attempt to claim scripture alone guided by private interpretation alone as the final authority on faith and morals. With respect to the authority of the emperor to arrogate the authority of the church, St. John responds forcefully on the basis of apostolic succession, "It was not to emperors that Christ gave the authority to bind and loose, but to apostles and to those who succeeded them as shepherds and teachers." Several times he refers to emperor Leo by name so there can be no doubt of his meaning. St. John is not shy to imply that the iconoclasm movement is, in essence, nothing more than a resurgence of the Manichee heresy that viewed matter as inherently evil. He challenges this heresy with "You abuse matter and call it worthless. So do the Manichees, but the divine Scripture proclaims that it is good. [Gen 1:31]" And when challenging the view that images of matter could not be made or venerated he responds, "For just as the holy Fathers destroyed the sacred places and temples of the demons and in their place raised up temples in the name of the saints, and we reverence them, so they destroyed the images

of the demons and instead of them put up images of Christ and the Mother of God and the saints." And, St. John further asserts, "I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake, and in matter made his abode, and through matter worked my salvation. I reverence therefore matter and I hold in respect and venerate that through which my salvation has come about, I reverence it not as God, but as filled with divine energy and grace." St. John also links images with the veneration of saints and contends that removing an image of a saint is the same as not venerating them, and, he contends concerning the saints, "It is just as bad not to offer the honor due to those who are worthy, as it is to offer inappropriate glory to the worthless." St. John's eloquence alone makes this an enjoyable and inspiring read. The relevance to the issues related to images which St. John touches upon (relics, hagiography, Mary, icons, statues, scripture and tradition) are still hindering our unity today and that makes this work all the more valuable to us. This is a must read for anyone interested in the development of Christian doctrines or church history.

I enjoyed this for the very fact that I am not good at reacting to non believers questions about my faith and this book helped me so much I will read it a second time. It is very easy to follow as well and not many of the books like this are. I think it is a very good book.

St. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, translated by Andrew Louth (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003). Pp. 163. Paperback \$17.00. If anyone is interested in Orthodox iconography, or the tradition of Christian painting, this book is a must read. Because this book is well translated and very accessible, I highly recommend simply reading this book - a primary source - rather than reading a secondary source where an author describes St. John of Damascus's theology of iconography. What makes this book an especially "must read" for those interested in iconography is the influence St. John had on the theology of Christian images. This book provides the foundation for all subsequent theology. In addition, St. John not only articulates the theology of images, but he articulates how iconography is central to all of Christian theology. His treatment is all-inclusive, and it goes much further than simply arguing that now that God has been seen in the person of Jesus Christ we can depict his image. Because iconography is so central to Christian theology and salvation, this book is a must read. I won't write out his full theology here, but I will give a brief introduction. He starts by taking a look at the Old Testament prohibition against idols. St. John views this prohibition from two perspectives: 1) the nature of the commandment, and 2) the definition of veneration. He says that the nature of the commandment

was to prevent the Israelites from falling into idolatry. He also argues that the commandment is more specifically against depicting the nature/essence/substance of God, and to prevent humanity from worshiping creation instead of the Creator. Iconography, St. John points out, does neither of these: it's not a depiction of God's essence, nor does it lead one to worship creation. The second aspect, veneration, boils down to an articulation of definition. St. John argues that veneration has two meanings: one is worship, and the other is to pay honor to someone. While worship is due to God alone, honoring the person depicted in an icon is not worship, but it is paying honor, which ultimately glorifies God. It is, at this point, that St. John is able to fully turn his attention to iconography. What changes the entire game is the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, that is God enfleshed, or Incarnate. St. John writes, "Therefore I am emboldened to depict the invisible God, not as invisible, but as he became visible for our sake, by participating in the flesh and blood. I do not depict the invisible divinity, but I depict God made visible in the flesh" (I.4). Even the Incarnation has several levels of understanding. In the first aspect of the argument, St. John argues that what was invisible is now visible. Here he does a lengthy analysis of the definitions of "image." He states that it is important to note that images make manifest what was hidden or unseen. In this way, an image holds two realities together: the seen/visible and unseen/invisible. With this in mind, St. John is able to say that icons of Christ both depict the Son of God as he was in the 1st century, as well as indicate his invisible presence among us now. At this point, that St. John delves deeper into Incarnational theology. He reminds us that after God created the visible (earth, animals, seas, etc.) and invisible (heaven, angels, etc.) worlds, God created humanity to unite the two worlds (i.e., we were created in His image to attain His likeness). Our task, in sum, was to make creation a sacrament. However, we failed in this task; but Christ, through his Incarnation, was able to succeed where we failed. This union means that humanity is now infused with divinity. Matter is recreated, and it is now glorified with God's presence. It is for this reason that we can venerate the icons. St. John writes, "I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake, and in matter made his abode, and through matter worked my salvation. 'For the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' It is clear to all that flesh is matter and is a creature. I reverence therefore matter and I hold in respect and venerate that through which my salvation has come about, I reverence it not as God, but as filled with divine energy and grace" (II.14). In this way, the use of icons in worship is a sacramental act. It is also because of the Incarnation that we can glorify God through the saints; after all they are able to participate in the life of God because of the divine/human union in Christ. So when we venerate the image of the saints, we are, in actuality, glorifying God. St. John takes it further by writing, "The temple that Solomon built was dedicated

with the blood of animals [Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement] and adorned with images of animals, of lions and bulls and phoenixes and pomegranates. Now the Church is dedicated by the blood of Christ and his saints and adorned with an image of Christ and his saints" (II.15). There's much more in this these amazing three treatises; however, it's really about the Incarnation, the Son of God taking on flesh, and the transfiguration of matter that takes place as a result, which allows for our deification. It's also about the meaning of image and veneration, the dignity of matter, and the importance of the unwritten tradition handed down by the Church through the apostles and now articulated by St. John.

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