

Icons

Iconology not Iconography

Orthodox Faithful prostrate themselves before icons, kiss them, and burn candles before them. Icons are censed by the Priest and carried in processions. So they hold an important and special place in Orthodox worship and devotion. But what do these gestures and actions mean? What is the significance of Icons? Aren't they idols prohibited by the Old Testament?

These are just some questions we will try to cover today.

Some of the answers to these questions can be found in the writings of St John of Damascus (776), who wrote in the Mid-Eighth Century at the height of the iconoclast (anti-icon) controversies in the Church, controversies which were resolved only by the 7th Ecumenical Council (787), which borrowed heavily from these writings.

As St John points out, in ancient times God, being without form (incorporeal) and without limit (uncircumscribed), was never depicted, since it is impossible to represent that which is immaterial, has no shape, is indescribable and is unencompassable. Holy Scripture states categorically: No one has ever seen God (John 1: 18) and You cannot see My [God's] face, for man shall not see Me and live (Exodus 33: 20). The Lord forbade the Hebrews to fashion any likeness of the Divinity, saying: You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in Heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (Exodus 20: 4). Consequently, the Holy Apostle Paul also asserts: Since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divinity is like gold, silver, or stone, engraved by human art and imagination. (Acts 17: 29).

Tradition witnesses that the Orthodox Church had a clear understanding of the importance of Icons right from the beginning; and this understanding never changed.

It is derived from the teachings concerning the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The use of Icons is grounded in the very essence of Christianity, since Christianity is the revelation by the God-Man not only of the Word of God, but also of the Image of God; for, as St John the Evangelist tells us, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1: 14).

And because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, we can now portray Him pictorially, in our iconography. There is more Scripture which substantiates the validity of iconography:

St John the Evangelist proclaims, "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known (John 1:18)." That is, He has revealed the Image or Icon of God. For being the brightness of [God's] glory, and the

express image of [God's] person (Hebrews 1: 3), the Word of God in the Incarnation revealed to the world, in His own Divinity, the Image of the Father. When St Philip asks Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father," He answered him: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father (John 14: 8, 9)." Thus as the Son is in the bosom of the Father, likewise after the Incarnation He is consubstantial or of the same nature with the Father, according to His divinity being the Father's Image, equal in honor to Him.

The truth expressed above, which is revealed in Christianity, thus forms the foundations of Christian pictorial art.

St John of Damascus further tells us that because the Word became flesh (John 1: 14), we are no longer in our infancy; we have grown up, we have been given by God the power of discrimination and we know what can be depicted and what is indescribable.

We can portray His inexpressible descent, His Nativity from the Blessed Virgin, His Baptism in the Jordan, His Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, His sufferings, death and miracles. We can depict the Cross of Salvation, the Sepulcher or tomb, the Resurrection and the Ascension, both in words and in colors. We can confidently represent God the Invisible not as an invisible being, but as one Who has made Himself visible for our sake by sharing in our flesh and blood.

The Scriptures are considered an Icon. The Book of the Gospels is an Icon.

According to St Basil the Great (379): As the word of Holy Scripture is an image, so the image is also a word, for, what the word transmits through the ear, that painting silently shows through the image [Discourse 19, On the 40 Martyrs]. In other words, the Icon contains and professes the same truth as the Gospels and therefore, like the Gospels, is based on exact data, and is not a human invention, for if it were otherwise, Icons could not explain the Gospels nor correspond to them.

Are we worshipping the material: wood, colors, paints...etc?

As St John of Damascus asserts: In former times God who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now that God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I am able to make an image (icon) of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake, and made Himself to dwell in matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will never cease from honoring the matter through which my salvation has been effected. I honor it, but not as God. [On the Divine Images, trans. David Anderson. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980, Pg 23].

So, according to St John of Damascus, those who refuse to venerate an Icon also refuse to worship God's Son, Who is the living image and unchanging reflection of God

the Invisible. “Be it known,” he says, “that anyone who seeks to destroy the Icons of Christ or His Mother, the Blessed Theotokos, or any of the Saints, is the enemy of Christ, the Holy Mother of God, and the Saints, and is the defender of the Devil and his demons.”

Origins: Pre-Christian styles Egypt & Rome (Fayyum), Mandyllion & St Luke the iconographer. OT Iconography: Ark of the Covenant, Temple Veil with Cherubim.

Catacombs: Fish, Bread...

Edict of Milan 313: Byzantine Iconography

Purpose: Didactic & Devotional

“Painting can do for the illiterate what writing does for those who can read.” St Gregory the Great

Theology in color and pictures.

Icons painted/written strictly according to tradition:

Iconographers are required to adhere to tradition, both of icon painting itself as well as of the church in general. This is consistent with the idea that Scripture itself was written according to Tradition. There are many references in Scripture to things that were passed on verbally but not written down. (2 Thessalonians 2: 15 – things passed on by mouth and letter, I Corinthians 11: 2 – urged to maintain traditions passed on to them).

Iconography deliberately does not resemble the art of the world, but is other-worldly and transcendent. It instead reflects the transfigured, Heavenly reality. It functions as a channel of grace rather than mere decorative artwork. “The beauty of the church is different from the beauty of the world because it reflects the harmony of the age to come.” “An icon is thus the servant of the Holy Tradition of the Church, a servant of the Gospel, not a mere artistic device.”

“The icon is joined to its prototype because it portrays the person and carries their name. This is precisely what makes communion with the represented person possible, what makes them known.” When you honor the image, you honor the prototype.

Latreia v Proskynesis

St John of Damascus distinguishes between veneration and adoration using the terms absolute worship (adoration) and relative worship (veneration). He identifies five kinds of absolute worship:

1. Adoration – we give this to God alone
 - a. All will eventually worship, willingly or unwillingly (Philippians 2)
2. The awe and yearning we have for God
 - a. He is perfect and good
 - b. He is admired, worshipped, glorified and desired
3. Thanksgiving for all good things
4. Beseeching God to listen to our needs and desires
5. Repentance and confession

In addition, he identifies seven kinds of relative worship or veneration. This kind of honor may be offered to created things.

1. Places where God has rested – Holy Places (Why people go on Pilgrimages)
 - a. Includes people – Theotokos and the Saints
 - b. God dwells in them
 - c. "...they are truly gods, not by nature but because they partake of the divine nature..."
2. Places where God has accomplished our salvation
 - a. Mountt Sinai, Nazareth, the cave and manger of Bethlehem, ...
3. Objects dedicated to God
 - a. E.g. the holy Gospel and other books
 - b. Patens, chalices, censers, candlesticks, altars
 - c. Daniel 5: 2 – Belshazzar made people serve wine in sacred vessels and God brought his kingdom to an end – signifying the sacredness of devotional items.
4. Images that were seen by prophets
 - a. Aaron's rod (prefigured the mystery of the virgin)
 - b. The cross
5. Each other
 - a. We are God's inheritance and were made according to His image
6. Those who have been given authority to rule over us
 - a. Pharaoh - Genesis 50: 18 – Joseph and his brothers prostrated themselves (Proskynesis) before Pharaoh.
7. Masters by their servants

"The icon becomes a meeting place, an existential encounter, a window through which we look on the Saints not as shadowy figures from a remote past but as contemporary brothers and sisters in Christ, members of the same household of God. We feel free to call on them through prayer for family support as they intercede to God on our behalf.

Photos/Keepsakes of loved ones.

Icon Screen: Tier 1 Local, Tier 2 Apostles, Tier 3 Prophets... Middle Last Supper 1, Deisis 2, Cross 3.

Icons are clearly labeled and titled. Figures portrayed clearly show their station in life (eg. dressed as clergy, monastics, royalty, warriors, martyrs holding crosses, theologians/ascetics with scrolls...)

Not Icons: Sacred Heart, Christ hanging pathetically (Nestorianism), Non-Orth "Saints," Statues & Figurines.

How we venerate icons.

Summary

As windows into the next world, icons serve to teach and remind us of the importance of the spiritual life. Without icons, our churches would very quickly become theaters full of spectators, rather than places where earth and Heaven meet, where the Angels and Saints join us in worshipping God the Holy Trinity, the Creator.

Orthodox icons are painted according to very specific patterns and regulations, which must be followed strictly by the iconographer. Many iconographers are monastics, though a lay person may also paint an icon under strict spiritual supervision.

As for the reverence we should hold for icons: We should approach an icon with the same reverence and awe that we reserve for the Precious Cross and Holy Scripture. We venerate an icon in order to communicate the reverence, respect and love which we hold for the subject of the icon.

Because icons are holy, there are particular ways they should be handled and displayed.

At home: The Orthodox Christian home is like a family church. We choose an Eastern wall or corner of a room to set up our icon corner. The icon corner is our family or home altar. We should always include in the icon corner an icon of Christ, the Theotokos and any saints whom we wish to venerate regularly. In front of the icons, safely out of reach of small children or pets, we should keep an oil lamp burning.

When travelling: Whenever we travel, we take a small diptych icon with us. These are small icons usually of Christ and the Theotokos, which are hinged together and folded up to protect the icons when packed in a suitcase. Whenever we stop for the night or take rest from our travels, we take out the icons and set them up in our hotel room or wherever else and it is even better when we know where East is so we can face East when we pray in front of our icons.

Icons are not intended to be realistic paintings of events but rather symbolic interpretations of the great spiritual qualities of the saints such as sacrifice, humility, devotion, faith and love. Icons depicting saints must clearly indicate who the saint is (martyr, clergy, monastic, warrior, royalty...etc) and the deeds leading to sainthood.