The Use of the Bible in the Byzantine
Iconoclastic Controversy

The Iconoclastic controversy, the great dispute over religious images which went on from 726 to 843 A.D., is a central event in Byzantine history. It shook the East Roman Empire to a degree comparable only to that of the Arian controversy in the fourth century. It had profound effects, mainly of a political nature, on the relationship between the Eastern and Western halves of Christendom and was one of the milestones which led to their separation in 1054 A.D. However, Iconoclasm, unlike Monophysitism, did not cause a schismatic Church to come into existence[1]. It remained a debate within Byzantine Christianity.

1.

The first Christian thinker to make the question of religious images a major issue was *Epiphanius,* bishop of Salamis in the late fourth century A.D[2].

G. Ostrogorsky has argued that certain fragments attributed to Epiphanius by the Iconoclasts of the eighth century, notably No. 16 (= Holl No. 13), refute a defence of images based on the contention that Christ may be depicted because He became a man, and claims that this reasoning was characteristic of the Iconodules of the Iconoclastic period[3]. Had Epiphanius used such a Christological argument in the fourth century, it would surely have been quoted at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 which also preserved the arguments of the Iconoclastic Council of 754. According to Ostrogorsky, those fragments of Epiphanius are therefore unauthentic. His circular argument is unconvincing. Epiphanius had already been anticipated by the Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea in his letter to Constantia in which he refused her request for a picture of Christ[4]. Moreover, Epiphanius is not arguing against a logically-thought-out defence of images — he merely says "some say" (phasín tines) that Christ is represented as man because He was born of the Virgin Mary[5]. There was no particular reason why the 787 Council should produce Epiphanius' hostile fragment as a defence of the Christological argument. Epiphanius does not go far beyond Eusebius.

What of Epiphanius' views? One day, he says, he came across a village church in Palestine and on the curtain hanging before the door was a picture of Christ or one of the Saints. Epiphanius tore down the curtain and enraged wrote a treatise against those who idolatrously attempted to make icons representing Christ, the Mother of God, the martyrs, angels or prophets. He inveighs against those who plaster the walls of churches with representations of the saints. They are not representations at all. St. John had said, "when He shall be revealed we shall be like unto Him"; St. Paul referred to the Saints as "of the same form as the Son of God"; Jesus had said that the Saints "shall be as the angels of God". It is wrong, then, to desire to see those Saints, who will one day be glorified, represented in inglorious, dead matter. The Saints themselves do not desire such reverence. And what of Christ? How can one comprehend the inconceivable, the ineffable, the incomprehensible? Was the object of the Incarnation that Christ should be

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[1] W. H. C. Frend, The Rise of the Monophysite Movement (1972), pp. 354—59, shows how Monophysitism, bereft of Byzantine inspiration and opposition, became a religion of survival only.

[2] K. Holl, Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte, 2 (1928), pp. 351ff.

[3] G. Ostrogorsky, Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Bilderstreites (1929), pp. 68ff.

[4] Patr. gr. 20, 1545ff.

[5] Holl (A. 2), No. 13.

represented at your hands in painting? Is He not the likeness of the Father, does He not call the dead to life? Art is a contempt of God, "thou shalt reverence the Lord thy God and Him only shalt thou worship".

Epiphanius' fellow bishops were somewhat unmoved by his protest – the cult of images had not yet reached any great proportions in the Christian East – as was also the Emperor Theodosius to whom he appealed. Theodosius was told that the devil was dragging back Christians into ancient idolatry. The pictures were lies and the imaginations of men. Even an archangel had been depicted with sinews and bones. So all pictures should be swept from the churches and no new mosaics added. Epiphanius was finally reduced to leaving in his will dire warnings to his flock to keep to the traditions they had received and not to bring images into churches or burial places of the Saints. God should be inscribed in their hearts. Anathema to any who seek to represent through material colours the outline of the Word Incarnate[6].

This protest against images was not part of a developed theological polemic. It was simply a protest against idolatry, an invasion of paganism into the Church: "When images are put up, the customs of the pagans do the rest" (stésantes ... tàs eikónas tà tôn ethnôn éthē loipòn poioûsi)[7]. Pagan apologists too were conscious of the charge of idolatry and they developed an apologia for images.

2.

We must now examine the Christian apologia, as it developed in the *pre-Iconoclastic period*. The principal charge of the Iconoclasts, at the outset of the Byzantine controversy, was the same as that of Epiphanius – idolatry.

In support of this the Old Testament provided most of the ammunition. The second of the ten commandments was the obvious starting point, "Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above nor in the earth beneath"[8]. To this was added a variety of texts such as Deut. 6,13, Psalm 97,7, John 1,18, John 1,37, John 4,24, John 20,29, Rom. 1,23, 25, Rom. 10,17, 2. Cor. 5,16. In reply the Iconodules asserted that idolatry was possible only in paganism. To fail to see that Christ has destroyed idolatry is to nullify his work. Christ is God, not a creature, so his image cannot be an idol. There was a legitimate use of material things, such as an act of reverence, which was not to be equated with the worship of God. Thus in the LXX proskýnēsis is used of Abraham bowing before the children of Heth (Gen. 23,7), of Jacob greeting Esau (Gen. 33,3), and of Jacob and Pharaoh (Gen. 47,7)[9]. The legitimacy of an image made of material things lies in the fact that man was created in the image of God[10]. The elaborate scriptural regulations about the details of the tabernacle are divine authority for the use of material things in worship (Ex. 25,18, 40; 31,1–6, 35,4–10, 36,37ff.). Similarly the bulls erected in Solomon's temple (2 Kings 6,25, 29) and the palm trees in Ezekiel's mystical temple (Ezek. 41,18) point in the same direction – arguments already used in anti-Jewish polemic. John Damascene concludes that although Scripture calls the idols of the heathen the work of men's hands what it forbids is the veneration of the images of daemons, i.e. pagan gods, not the veneration of inanimate objects per se[11].

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[6] Mansi, Concilia XIII.292D; cf. Niceph. Apol. Min. 837 BC; Theod. Stud. 388D.
[7] Epiph. Pan. haer. 27, 6, 10.
[8] Joh. Dam. Or. 1.1235a, d; 2.1288d; Niceph. Antirrh. 3.448a; Mansi, Concilia XIII.285a.
[9] Joh. Dam. Or. 1.1240b, 1244b.
[10] Niceph. Antirrh. 3.484a.
[11] Joh. Dam. Or. 1.1257c; cf. Definition of Nicaea II, Mansi, Concilia XIII.373: "They have failed to distinguish sacred and profane, styling the images of Our Lord and of His Saints by the same name as the statues of diabolical idols."

On the more popular level at the outset of the controversy the Patriarch Germanos gave this answer: The Old Testament command against idolatry meant that God was like no visible being or thing, and consequently any representation of a visible thing would involve a wrong conception of God's nature. But the coming of Christ had revealed the nature of God, consequently in Christ idolatry is done away. The Christian by the very fact that he is a Christian cannot be an idolater. He knows the true nature of God and in whatever form or by whatever means he offers his worship it is to God alone that he gives it. To charge the Church with idolatry is equivalent to saying that Christ has failed[12].

Underlying this argument and the appeal to scriptural texts was a deeper division between Iconoclast and Iconodule. This may be illustrated from a fragment of the Iconoclast Emperor Constantine V which is quoted in the refutation of the Patriarch Nicephorus: καὶ εἰ καλῶς, homooúsion autēn eînai toû eikonizoménou[13]. The Emperor held that the image was of the same ousía as that of which it is an image. On this premiss images are indeed idols and the battery of Old Testament texts merely supported this position. Images thus drew "the spirit of man from the lofty adoration of God to the low and material adoration of the creature[14] and substituted the created thing for its Creator". In reply the Iconodules admitted that the image was closely connected with its subject — but they maintained a clear distinction in ousía between image and prototype and so defended image worship from the charge of idolatry much as the pagan apologists had earlier rebutted the accusation of Christians. It was John Damascene who formulated this apologetic systematically. The honour given to the image is referred to its prototype.

This difference between Iconolast and Iconodule is fundamental to the understanding of the apologetic of the controversy. The Iconoclast held that a material object could be the habitation of a spiritual being — that the ousíai of both coalesced into one ousía — so any worship of the image was in the nature of idolatry. Against this the Iconodules laboured to show that, however close the connexion between image and original, their ousíai were different — hence the worship of images was legitimate as this worship could be referred to the prototype. Essentially this was a Platonic view.

Before considering John Damascene's apologia in more detail it is worth noting that this Platonic view is found in the pre-Iconoclastic period. So Philostorgius, in the first half of the fifth century, although deprecating proskýnēsis before the statue of Christ at Paneas, yet sees in a joyful approach to the image a way of demonstrating one's love for its archetype[15]. This idea received a powerful impetus in the late fifth century through the anagogical concepts introduced into Christian thought by the Neoplatonic mystical writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius:

"The essences and orders which are above us ... are incorporeal and their hierarchy is of the intellect and transcends our world. Our human hierarchy, on the contrary, we see filled with the multiplicity of visible symbols, through which we are led up hierarchically and according to our capacity to the unified deification, to God and divine virtue. As is meet to them they comprehend as pure intellects. We however are led up, as far as possible, through visible images to contemplation of the divine[16]."

For Pseudo-Dionysius contemplation of the world of senses serves as a means to elevate ourselves towards the world of Spirit. While this writer does not specifically apply

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[12] Germ. Ep. to Thomas of Claudiopolis, Mansi, Concilia XIII.108b.
[13] Patr. gr. 100.225A.
[14] Mansi, Concilia XIII.228.
[15] J. Bidez, Philostorgius Kirchengeschichte, = Gr. chr. Schr., 21 (1913), p. 78.
[16] Ps. Dion. De eccl. hier. 1.2, Patr. gr. 3.373AB.

his theory to the realm of art, he frequently refers to the objects which make up the world of senses as eikónes — and Christian apologists were not slow to apply his theory to the role accorded to images in the life of the Church. So the letter written by Bishop Hypatius of Ephesus to Julian of Atramytion[17] makes simple and uneducated people, for whom the images were books, become part of a Neoplatonic hierarchical system: "We leave material adornment in the churches . . . because we conceive that each order of the faithful is guided and led up to the divine in its own way and that some are led even by these (images) towards the intelligible beauty and from the abundant light in the sanctuaries to the intelligible and immaterial light[18]." This is the thought and language of Pseudo-Dionysius applied to the problem of the images in churches.

In the Christian apologies of the post-Justinian era this Neoplatonic argument, that images lead us from the visible to the invisible, is frequently found. Yet in addition the apologists of the late sixth and seventh centuries, i.e. immediately preceding the outbreak of the Iconoclastic controversy, use additional arguments in which the individual worshipper does not appear — rather the emphasis is on the timeless and cosmic relationship between the image and its prototype. The role of the onlooker was accordingly reduced and the icon given a status of its own in the divine order of the Universe. As by virtue of the hierarchic order there is an ascent from the lower and sensual to the higher and intellectual sphere and finally to God, so God is Himself reflected in the lower orders and material objects (eikónes) which make up our physical surroundings. However it is significant that when Christian apologists of the late sixth and seventh centuries claim that the relationship between image and prototype is a transcendental one the authority on which they draw is the Bible and particularly Gen. 1,27. So Leontius, of Neapolis, in his apologia against the Jews already mentioned, defends Christian images in these words:

"The image of God is man, who is made in the image of God, and particularly that man who has received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Justly therefore I honour and worship the image of God's servants and glorify the house of the Holy Spirit[19]."

God's servants are the Saints who are "images of God" because they have received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The house, the image, is hallowed and transfigured by the Spirit in the case of Saints. So the dignity of the human form is vindicated — there is a descent from God to the Saint and from the Saint to the icon through the "image" element in each step. At the basis of Leontius' use of Gen. 1,27 is the Neoplatonic belief in the divine manifesting itself in a descending sequence. Yet in this descent and ascent the ousíai of prototype and image remain distinct and so the charge of idolatry was excluded.

3.

John Damascene, the greatest Iconodule apologist of the *Iconoclastic period,* devoted much space to showing that behind the Iconoclast charge of idolatry was an abnormal fear of matter which ultimately was Manichean. He then examined the nature of an image

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[17] F. Diekamp, Or. chr. anal. 117 (1938), pp. 127ff. On Hypatius see P. J. Alexander, Hypatius of Ephesus: A Note on Image Worship in the Sixth Century: Harv. Theol. Rev. 45 (1952), pp. 177ff.

[18] Diekamp (A. 17), p. 128.

[19] Patr. gr. 93.1604CD.

and gives a reasoned defence of image worship. The image, for Damascene, serves various purposes[20]:

It may simply be a recollection of past events like a pictorial book or record. – It may be a type foreshadowing something else. – It may be an analogy. Damascene cites such examples as the sun, its light, and its beam, or the rose, the tree, the flower, the scent which are images of the Trinity. – It may be katà mímēsin, by imitation, as the created cannot strictly be an image of the uncreated. – It may be a plan of a future undertaking, like the foreknowledge in the mind of God. – It may be the image katà phýsin, as contrasted with katà thésin kaì mímēsin. The example is Christ, who is the self-existent image of God, as man is the potential image katà thésin.

John Damascene puts the picture or statue, the earthly image, lowest in the list as its significance is only found in the others. He sees six stages evolving from God:

Christ the direct image of God.
The thought (énnoia) of God, His creative mind.
Man actually created but having affinities with the uncreated.
The visible world as a medium revealing God but in no way part of God.
Particular objects or incidents in the visible world alluding to particular facts in God's plan.
The historical icon, recording good and evil, to promote virtue or shame.

There is thus a ladder of revelation from visible to invisible[21] and vice-versa and the visible is in some measure endowed sacramentally with the virtue of the invisible it represents. As the image of the Ruler is the Ruler, so the image of Christ is Christ, and the image of the saint is the saint.

"If power is not divided nor glory distributed, honouring the image becomes honouring the one who is depicted in the image. Devils have feared the saints and have fled from their shadow. The shadow is an image, and I make an image that I may scare the daemons ... Material things are endued with a divine power because they bear the names of those they represent ... Material things in themselves demand no veneration, but if the person who is represented be full of grace, the material becomes partaker of grace metaphorically, by faith[22]."

In Damascene's view an image is in some sense a sacrament and from the image to God and from God to the image there is a graded ascent and descent as in the Neoplatonic scheme.

It is significant that later Iconodule writers do not reproduce Damascene's reasoning, although Theodore Studite refers to it[23], and there are other echoes, e.g. in the Life of Stephen which states that an image is "a door opening the God-created mind to the likeness of the original within"[24]. This view of images made articulate the sentiments of those who were wedded to icons. The Iconoclasts never really answered satisfactorily this sacramental view of images although, in fact, it may have led them to concentrate on the Christological issue. They may have realised that an image of Christ or a saint bore a relation to its prototype that a pagan idol did not have.

It was essential to the Iconodule position to establish that there was a difference in essence between an image and its original – even though their relationship was sacramental and hierarchical. Only so could the charge of idolatry be avoided. On the other hand the Iconoclasts fought hard for the view that the image was of the same ousía as that which it represented. So for them the eucharist, the cross and the church building

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[20] Joh. Dam. Or. 3.1341c, 1340d, 1337c; E. J. Martin, A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy (1930), pp. 118–19.
[21] Joh. Dam. Or. 1.1240Cff.
[22] Joh. Dam. Or. 1.1264B.
[23] Theod. Stud. Antirrh. 1.341–3.
[24] Vit. Steph. 1113B.

were the only permissible images: in the eucharist, after consecration, the elements, being now the Body and Blood of Christ, were of the same ousía as the prototype . . . This *is* my Body. The eikón is not a likeness but is under a figure (mórphōsis), Christ Himself[25]. It is only the offering made by the priest's hands which fulfills this purpose. All bread is not His Body but becomes His Body by an unseen process in the spiritual world. This is not strictly Monophysitism, as Martin maintains[26], but follows logically from the initial Iconoclast position that a true image must be of the same ousía as its original, and so the eucharist was a true image. Theodore Studite regarded this view of the eucharist as a terrible blasphemy. If the eucharist was only an eikón its virtue was challenged — it was not reality.

The tragedy of the Iconoclastic controversy lay not simply in an opposition of a magical view of images to a Neoplatonic view, and not simply in a different appeal to the Bible, for both sides found what they wanted there. Rather it lay in a different conception of the relation of an image to its original. Had the two sides examined together what each meant by the terms ousía and eikón, much abortive controversy might have been avoided. The terms meant different things to each. As with the Arian controversy of the fourth century there was a chasm of misunderstanding which no political patchwork could close.

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[25] So Constantine V; Niceph. Antirrh. 2.333B, 336A.
[26] Martin (A. 20), p. 127.