

A NOTE ON THE ICONOCLASTIC CONTROVERSY: GREEK AND LATIN DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT MATTER AND DEIFICATION

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The iconoclastic controversy in Byzantium is extremely complex, involving political, economic, and social factors, as well as the interplay of theology and popular piety.¹ Even though these various dimensions generally have been well explored, certain corners remain to be illuminated. One of the dustier and less crucial, but nonetheless interesting issues, is that of the Latin response to the Greek controversy. In this Latin response, political considerations doubtless loomed large, particularly for the Carolingian court, which sought equality with the Byzantine rulers for Charlemagne; but the theological disagreements were genuine and must also be taken seriously.

My intention here is to focus on one small aspect of that religious concern: the role of matter in the bringing of grace to the human as understood in two crucial theological sources. First I wish to look at the theology of John of Damascus, particularly in his treatise *On the Orthodox Faith*, a foundational document for the Byzantines; and next I shall focus on the *Caroline Books*, representing the Latins' theological reaction to the Greek Iconoclastic Controversy. Then I will explore a theological factor which substantially contributed to the Latin difficulty in comprehending the Greek dispute, namely, the *Caroline Books'* dependence on an Augustinian theology which lacked at precisely the point crucial for debate about the images—the question of the grace-bearing possibilities of matter.

1. *The Eastern Developments and John Damascene*

In the Byzantine Empire the first eruption of the Iconoclastic Controversy occurred under Leo III, who in 726 ordered that icons should not be venerated and that those which could be touched by the

¹L. W. Barnard, *Greco-Roman and Oriental Background of the Iconoclastic Controversy* (Leiden, 1974), points out some of the dangers of overly simple explanations.

people should be removed. Constantine V (A.D. 741-75) continued and intensified his predecessor's policy, and in 754 convoked a council at Hiera which condemned the veneration of icons and anathematized Patriarch Germanos and John of Damascus, the chief hierarchical and theological defenders of images. Leo IV (775-80) relaxed iconoclastic efforts somewhat, and his widow Irene in 787 convoked Nicaea II. In 813 Leo V came to the throne, following Irene's first two successors Nikephoros I and Michael I, and reintroduced iconoclasm, which was continued with more or less intensity by the next emperors, Michael II and Theophilos. In 843 Theodora, regent for the young Michael III, called a synod at Constantinople which restored the veneration of images, in what later Byzantines celebrated as the Triumph of Orthodoxy.² This presentation is concerned with the first phase of the Controversy, but we should keep in mind that most of the theological issues remained the same during both phases, and that Theodore of Studion continued John's theological argumentation, with some additions of his own.

Within this network of events the most important theological figure was not even a subject of the Byzantine Empire, but was subject to and one-time civil official of the caliph of Damascus. John of Damascus had become a monk at Mar Sabba near Jerusalem sometime soon after 730, dying there about 749. From his safety beyond Byzantium he wrote tracts and sermons against the iconoclasts and incorporated principles favoring icon veneration within his systematic theological work. He wove together some of the earlier defense of image veneration, as well as his own linking of such veneration to Christ's incarnation and to the goodness of matter itself.³ As his condemnation by the Synod of Hiera in 754 would suggest, John was regarded as the great theological defender of the iconodules. All his successors, including Theodore of Studion, relied on him.

How did John of Damascus understand the role and function of the icon? His views on this have been well expounded by modern

²An excellent summary of the events is provided by Cyril Mango in his "Historical Introduction" in A. Bryer and J. Herrin, eds., *Iconoclasm* (Birmingham, Eng., 1977), pp. 1-6. Edward James Martin's *A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy* (London, n.d.) still provides the standard history of these events and the reaction of the Latin West to them.

³Barnard, pp. 86-88, 93-96; Stephen Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm During the Reign of Leo III*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 5: 346, subsidia, 41 (Louvain, 1973), pp. 107-109.

scholarship,⁴ and I wish to set forth here only a few salient points for comparison with the *Caroline Books*.

For one thing, John espoused a view similar to that of the Latins, regarding the icon as a sort of memorial or recollection which functions as a book for the illiterate.⁵ Of course, the substantive theological dispute did not relate to that notion, but to the veneration of icons and their grace-bearing capabilities.⁶

John found in Christ's incarnation a doctrinal foundation for his understanding of icons: as Christ's flesh was deified through contact with the indwelling divine nature united to the human nature, so too the flesh of the saints is deified through their contact with the humanity of Christ. In his first *Oration on Images* John states: "Just as the saints in their lifetime were filled by the Holy Spirit . . . his grace abides with their spirits and with their bodies in their tombs, and also with their likeness and holy images, not by nature, but by grace and power."⁷ The grace of Christ, therefore, according to John, is not limited to Christ himself and his sacraments, but can also be bestowed upon the believer through the saints, who act as vehicles of God's grace. John insists that the material icon is the bearer of grace for the devout, just as were the saints' shadows and relics which possessed healing powers in their times. Salvation comes through "looking on the human form of God" and letting the visible image of Christ be burnt into the soul, and, in an extended sense, through looking at the image of Christ found in the saints.⁸ For John, although not for the iconoclasts, the saints could transmit Christ's grace to others by their images, since they themselves had been deified by Christ.

In commenting on veneration of places or objects connected with the earthly life of the Lord, he further remarks, in the *Orations*: "I venerate and worship angels and men, and all matter participating in

⁴In addition to the sources already cited, see John Papajohn, "Philosophical and Metaphysical Basis of Icon Veneration in the Eastern Orthodox Church," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 2 (1956): 83-89.

⁵John of Damascus, *De Imaginibus*, Oratio 1.17, in PG 5: 94. Trans. of his three orations on the images by Mary Allies, in *St. John of Damascus on Holy Images* (London, 1898).

⁶Martin, pp. 185-187. Although Martin is referring to the second iconoclastic period and the theology of Theodore of Studion, as the reference to John of Damascus shows, this aspect of the conflict was already clearly understood in John's time.

⁷*De imag. Or.*, 1.19.

⁸*Ibid.*, 1.22.

divine power and ministering to our salvation through it.”⁹ John makes the same connection in *On the Orthodox Faith* in a somewhat different way than in the *Orations*. Through the Son’s incarnation we are made children by adoption and grace, John insists. In a very specific way, matter’s grace-bearingness is not simply a property of Jesus’ body alone; but through the power of the incarnation it extends to the material of the sacraments, which divinizes the body, just as the inward grace divinizes the soul.¹⁰

John’s treatment of the images focuses on the propriety of making images of Christ and the saints. The making of images is allowable since human beings are created in God’s image, and therefore God’s image can be represented in human beings. The image painted on walls or wood is an image of God’s image. John’s clear inference is that the icon as an extension of the saint’s body possesses the grace present in the body of the saint, and the honor given to the icon passes to the prototype. Thus, icons may be venerated as images of those created in God’s image and divinized by him. Although John does refer to the icon as the picture-book of the illiterate, his predominant notion is that of the icon as a vehicle of the divine-human relationship. The icon is not simply a reminder, but makes the imaged holy person present to us, “that we may still, hearing and believing, obtain the blessing of the Lord.”¹¹ The icon carries the worshiper’s veneration of Christ and the saints up to heaven; but at the same time it also serves as the bearer of grace from heaven to earth for the worshiper, like a bridge between the divine and the human.

Thus, the grace-bearing possibility of the material icon, so important to the ordinary Christian in an age when most people received the Eucharist infrequently, is defended by John both in his sermons and in his treatise *On the Orthodox Faith*. The icons are both a complement to and an extension of the sacraments, a locus for the *admirabile commercium* between God and mankind. As E. J. Martin notes, such a sacramental view of the icons does, in fact, represent the mainstream of both popular and theologically articulate iconodule thought.¹²

⁹Ibid., 3.

¹⁰*De Fide Orthodoxa*, PG 5: 94; 4: 9, 13.

¹¹Ibid., 4: 16.

¹²Martin, pp. 19-20. For Theodore of Studion’s version of this theology, see Martin, pp. 184-188.

2. *The Latin West and the Caroline Books*

In the Latin West there had been sporadic outbursts of iconoclasm, but never any organized, persistent, and theologically coherent movement as in the Byzantine world. The impetus for the Frankish reaction to the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy seems to have been as much an expression of Charlemagne's political frustrations with Irene and her government as it was a substantial theological concern.¹³

The theological battles vital for the Carolingians focused on Christology and Trinitarian theology, rather than on the veneration of images or even relics. Such concerns emerge in the *Caroline Books* themselves.¹⁴ The *Caroline Books*, the major theological response to the Byzantine conflict, were written around 790. Alcuin and Theodulf are most frequently suggested as authors, although there are other possible candidates. At present, the evidence for Theodulf as major author seems the most substantial.¹⁵

In 794 the Council of Frankfort, using a theology akin to that of the *Caroline Books* (*Libri Carolini*), condemned the theology of Nicaea II. Pope Hadrian, who had originally informed Charles of Nicaea II through a very defective translation of the Acts of the Council, was told vociferously of the Franks' objections in a variant of the *Caroline Books* called *A Chapter against the Synod* (*Capitulare adversus Synodum*). Neither the full argument of the *Caroline Books* nor the digest in the *Capitulare* ever seem to have reached Constantinople, and the whole issue died out in the West until it took form again in various Protestant and "proto-Protestant" movements several centuries later, when the *Caroline Books* provided the Protestants, especially John Calvin, with much material for their arguments.

The importance of the *Caroline Books* lies in the fact that they represent the major reasoned Western reaction to the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy. Our other Latin documents are briefer variations of the *Caroline Books* or synodal decrees, such as those of Frankfort or those of Paris in 825. In this regard, the *Caroline Books*

¹³Martin, pp. 222-226.

¹⁴Reinhold Seeberg, *The History of Doctrines*, trans. Charles E. Hay (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1952, 1954), 2: 27-29. Walther Schutz in *Einfluss Augustins in der Theologie und Christologie des VIII. und IX. Jahrhunderts* (Halle, 1913), provides a good general overview of the topic.

¹⁵Richard Haugh, *Photius and the Carolingians* (Belmont, Mass., 1974), p. 48; Frederich Hoer, *Charlemagne and his Court* (New York, 1975), p. 166.

occupy a similar position to the works of John Damascene as a theological response to the conflict. For this reason I have chosen to compare these two sources rather than using the decrees of Nicaea II.

Theologically, the *Caroline Books* represent a mixture of ideas from a variety of sources ranging over a multitude of topics, including fundamental attacks on the veneration of images, arguments against what were sometimes grossly mistranslated statements of the Greeks, seemingly endless verbal quibbles, and personal assaults on the character of some of the Greek bishops (a fairly common convention of the time).

The *Caroline Books* are divided into four separate books, each with its own preface. In the first of these four books, the Greeks are accused of introducing innovations into the church, inasmuch as the Synod of Constantinople of 754 had called images in churches idols, whereas Nicaea II had encouraged worshipping images. Emperor Charles, the author asserts, wants images used as ornaments and memorials, but no more. The book proper attacks the imperial call to Nicaea II, defends the authority of the Roman Church, and examines scriptural passages which the Council used. The conclusion is actually reached in the second book, namely, that only God should be adored and worshipped. The second book ends by asserting the "ecclesiastical tradition," defending images as ornaments and memorials. It opposes either destroying or adoring them. In the third book, after a confession of faith, which the author supposed to be from Jerome, but which actually was from Pelagius, he levels personal attacks on Tarasius and Irene and some of the bishops. Relics, which either were from saints or had been in direct contact with the bodies of saints, are distinguished from the images, which did not meet these criteria. Relics, the author reasons in chapter 24, are from the body which will be raised and glorified with Christ on the last day, while images are mere artistic representations. Thus, relics should be given great veneration, far beyond that of images. The keeping of the divine law, not adoration of images, is the beginning of the fear of the Lord. Finally, the fourth book resumes an attack on individuals, on pronouncements of Nicaea II, and on the authority of this Council.¹⁶

¹⁶Text of the *Caroline Books* in PL 98: 999-1218; *Monumenta Germanicae Historiae*, ed. H. Bastigen (1924). Discussion in Martin, pp. 222-261; a summary and analysis of their influence by A. Hauck in Schaff-Herzog, 2: 419-422. No English translation is available. Major discussions are found in Stephen Gero, "The Libri Carolini and the Image Controversy," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18 (1973): 7-34; Gert Haendler, *Epochen Karolingischer Theologie* (Berlin, 1958), pp. 27-42, 67-101.

3. *The Question of Grace-Bearing Properties of Matter*

Many strands of thought, marked by an impressive attempt to sort out issues on the basis of a fresh interpretation of Scripture and ecclesiastical authority, are woven together against a complex political background. In the remainder of this discussion I will focus on one thread which corresponds with that raised in my preceding discussion of the iconodules, namely, the grace-bearing properties of matter. It should be clear, even from the brief statements adduced so far, that the Greek iconodules and the Latins were operating on the basis of differing assumptions about matter, its potential for deification, and its relationship to Christ or the saints. The Latins rejected out of hand the concept of any sacramental or grace-bearing property of the icon with respect either to the soul or body of the believers, and they seemed ignorant of the Greek views on that issue.¹⁷ In fact, with the exception of John Scotus Erigena, no Carolingian theologian, even Alcuin or Theodulf, seems to have had any significant functional knowledge of the Greek language. Thus, although these Carolingians expressed some desire to know the works of the Greek theologians, they had no direct access to them.¹⁸

The Latin theologians regarded images as being edifying mental reminders, instructional aids, or simply decorations. The *Caroline Books* posit no intrinsic connection between the believers' respect paid to the image and the grace or favor received as a result of that encounter; in fact, they deny that the icon is the vehicle of grace. Even relics, which were far superior to icons and highly valued in the religious-cultural world of the Carolingians, did not always bear grace to the believer, and their worth and the occasional miracles worked through them were not an intrinsic part of them.¹⁹ God chose to use them, not for their present reality, but because at the last day they would be part of the particular saint's glorified body.

Such a perspective is not peculiar to the author of the *Caroline Books*, but has its roots in the theology of Augustine, on which the books themselves and Carolingian theology as a whole so heavily depended.²⁰ The *Caroline Books* reflect some of Augustine's fun-

¹⁷Gero, "Libri Carolini," pp. 14-15.

¹⁸Haugh, pp. 34-35.

¹⁹Arthur Mirgeler, *Mutations of Western Christianity* (New York, 1964), pp. 55-59.

²⁰Gero, p. 9; Haugh, p. 17.

damental theological assumptions, and cite him by name more than any other author—twenty-two times. Jerome, with the next highest number of references, was directly or indirectly quoted in eighteen different places, usually as support for the interpretation of biblical passages. Although this Carolingian Augustinianism had been tempered in some of its interpretation of free will and predestination under the influence of Gregory the Great, Augustine's opinion about the issues which relate to the image controversy was clearly felt in the theology of the *Caroline Books*. As Gert Haendler has noted, in summarizing other scholarly research, Augustine's influence was spiritualizing and bound up with an eschatological vision in the *Caroline Books*.²¹ My attempt here is to determine more specifically what this means with respect to the view of the role which matter could play in human "deification."

In seeking support from Augustine's writings, the author of the *Caroline Books* ranged widely over the Augustine corpus, using material from the *Letters*, *Sermons*, the *83 Different Questions*, *Commentary on the Psalms*, *On Christian Doctrine*, *On Heresies*, and *On the Trinity*.²² Augustine's theology is, of course, highly complex and nuanced, and his views did not remain static. Although the author of the *Caroline Books* truly represents Augustine in the sense that Augustine really says what the author claims for him, that which is clearly and boldly stated in the *Caroline Books* was in Augustine himself more carefully balanced and qualified. That is to say, the Augustinian theology of the *Caroline Books* is authentic "Augustinianism," albeit simplified.

In these *Books* Augustine's understanding of "image" as distinguished from "similitude" is explored (1:2), warnings against idolatry are delivered (4:25), and arguments raised about the true and false in worship (4:18). Major themes are often repeated, such as the insistence that the image of God is spiritual (see, e.g., 2:16), and it is declared that the human body is not a part of this imaging (2:21). In a slightly different perspective, Augustine is cited as being doubtful of veneration given to images that are reported to have worked wonders,

²¹Gero, "Libri Carolini," pp. 9-10; Haendler, pp. 57-58, 62; Haugh, pp. 17, 52. Haugh, pp. 35-36, comments on the Byzantines' ignorance of Augustine, who was known exclusively through florilegia, and their consequent inability to understand the fundamental theological approach of the Latin West.

²²References to Augustine are in 1: 2, 6, 8, 9, 11; 2: 5, 16, 22, 24, 28, 30; 3: 4, 5, 25, 27; 4: 18, 25, 27.

because such signs have been caused through the magic arts (2:25).

The author of the *Caroline Books* insists that the true image of God is the Son, through whom God's children are transformed into God's image in Spirit. Actually, Augustine's theological understanding precludes any direct relationship between matter and grace, such as that which is found in John of Damascus. Augustine identifies the image of God with the spirit, as does John, but suggests no way in which the body can participate in the divinization of the spirit in this present life. Salvation of the body is understood eschatologically: The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and it will be glorified in the final resurrection.²³ On the other hand, in John's thought and that of the iconodules generally, the flesh is even now being deified and transformed; one does not find the great gap between present earthly life and the eschaton that Augustine would seem to propose. Thus, the central argument against the deification of matter depends not so much on a positive assertion by Augustine, but rather on John's refusal to admit that the flesh will be deified only at the final resurrection.

Related to this matter is an assertion of Augustine relating to the material element of the sacraments. In wide contrast to the theology of the iconodules, Augustine's theology of the sacraments had emphasized the spiritual to the extent of leaving no real function for the matter of the sacrament, except to be the visible expression of that which must be "spiritually understood."²⁴ That is, the sacramental matter has no necessary or intrinsic relation to the spiritual effect, nor does the matter of the sacrament have any effect on the believer's body. Whereas in John's theology the matter of the sacrament deifies the body and the spiritual grace the soul, for Augustine the body is not deified now but must await the eschatological fulfillment, the matter of the sacrament having no intrinsic meaning, except to be—because of Christ's word—the visible sign of invisible grace. Thus, Augustine's sacramental theology undercut another theological position which might have made the iconodule position comprehensible in the West.

Relics are prized very highly by the *Caroline Books*, just as they are by Augustine, who valued them highly in his career as priest and bishop. Augustine, however, does not posit any necessary connection between the matter of the relics and the miraculous intervention of

²³*De Doc. Christiani*, 1: 19; *De Trin.*, 14: 4 (6).

²⁴*En. in Ps.* 98: 8; cited in *LC* 2: 5.

God. God simply uses them for a manifestation of his power, and Augustine does not formulate any intrinsic reason why this should be so. His only attempt to do so relates to the value of these bones, which will finally be glorified at the end of time. Their value is through anticipation, and Augustine never explains why God uses them here and now as vehicles of grace.²⁵ The power of relics is miraculous in the most strict sense, and therefore Augustine does not attempt to make a direct relationship between healing of a physical or spiritual kind and the relics which convey or bear such healing to the person. It would, therefore, seem more appropriate to call his perception of the relationship of the matter to the gracious work of God as "miraculous" rather than as "sacramental."

4. Conclusion

The point of the foregoing observations is to indicate that whereas Augustine constantly downplayed and minimized the grace-bearing capabilities of matter—whether relics, the human body, or sacramental elements—John of Damascus clearly had a substantially different view. The latter shared a concept of the sacramental possibilities of matter—namely, that the icon was an extension of the saint's body, here and now being deified and extending grace to the believer—while Augustine had put off the gracious deification of matter until the eschaton. It seems to me crucial to acknowledge that because of their dependence on Augustinian theology on this point, the Latins simply did not have the theological framework to enable them to assimilate or even to understand what the iconodules claimed they were doing in their veneration of the icons. Although this was not the only or probably even the major theological difference between the author of the *Caroline Books* and the iconodules, it represents a crucial distinction which prevented the Latins from plumbing the depths of Greek theology on this issue.

²⁵E.g., *De Civ. Dei*, 22: 8; F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop* (New York, 1961), pp. 471-497.