

## (Re-)Writing Icons: Picturing Icon Theology Anew

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It is a commonplace among English speaking Eastern Christians that icons – those religious images particular to the Eastern Christian tradition, rich with their own history, devotions, and theology – should be spoken of as being not drawn or painted, but rather *written*. “We write icons; we don’t paint them.” This peculiarity of language purports to highlight the significance these images hold for the faith and, indeed, the difference between these images and others. Unlike secular images and religious images employed merely for decoration or delight, icons instruct the faithful in the truths of the Gospel, and in this they function as equivalents to the written Word. For this reason Eastern Christians venerate in their liturgies both the Gospel book and the icons, two equal means of proclaiming the center of Christian faith: the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Icons, like the written Word, “speak” the faith; thus the focus on proper terminology when speaking about these holy images.

I propose that we ought to retire this manner of speaking of icons. I am by no means the first to suggest a correction of this verbal tic (for example, Prof. John Yoannis spoke on this issue at the Orthodox Theological Society annual meeting some years back). But the persistence of such language – I heard it just last week from a parish priest explaining icons to a group of visiting students – invites further reflection on why the faithful and those who teach them find this expression so attractive, as well as why this way of thinking about icons remains, in the final analysis, theologically misleading. In what

follows I will seek to show that instead of illuminating our understanding of the relationship between icons, the written Word, and the incarnation, speaking of icons as “written” unintentionally shackles the theological potential of the icon with the constraints of textuality.

I do not wish to suggest, however, that the equation of text and image implicit in the notion of “writing icons” is entirely misguided; rather, from the beginnings of icon theology we find evidence of such an equation. Iconophile theologian and saint, John of Damascus, regularly identified the icon’s powers with those of the book: quoting church father Basil of Caesarea, John noted that “memory comes about through word *and* images.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, he echoed earlier fathers in affirming that images are “books for the illiterate.”<sup>2</sup> John’s theological successor in the fight against iconoclasm (and arguably the most creative of all iconophile thinkers), St. Theodore of Studium, makes a similar statement: “[Icons] are holy books set out to be seen in all the churches of God, for the eyes of all men, just as the words of the books are set forth for the hearing.”<sup>3</sup> The earliest generation of iconophile theologians clearly understood the icon in terms of the book; indeed, to defend the creation and veneration of images against their iconoclast opponents they often justified images *in terms of* the book. Moreover, they regularly exploited the polyvalence of the Greek verb *graphein* (which means “to engrave,” and thus either to write or to depict) for their apologetic purposes. From this theology and from this Greek polysemy (and its Slavonic parallel) derives the modern insistence in some circles for speaking of “writing icons.”

It is clear from this brief survey that there exists a significant degree of conceptual overlap between text and image in early iconophile theology. But this emphasis on the equation of icons with books represents only a half-way point in the iconophile apologetic of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, for the iconophile

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<sup>1</sup> St. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>3</sup> St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, trans. Catherine Roth (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981), 38.

theologians equated text and image in the service of a more fundamental theological project: to elevate the icon as a unique expression of the Gospel of the incarnation. “He [Christ] was seen so that he could be painted, and so that those who worshiped the idols may worship Christ visually represented in human form,”<sup>4</sup> writes Theodore in another apology for icons. Here Theodore does not – in contrast to earlier arguments in defense of icons – simply invoke the incarnation as a justification for the Christian practice of iconography; rather, he states that the very *purpose* of the Incarnation was the Christian practice of iconography and its concomitant liturgical veneration. So much does Theodore understand icons as integral to the Christian faith that he imagines the Church as a community of iconographers: “the community of the Christian faithful, by whom Christ was seen in human form ... continues to paint Christ and to worship him until the present.”<sup>5</sup>

Christ came to be seen, Theodore claims, and for this books are insufficient precisely because in them we cannot physically see the human form of God’s salvific condescension. The incarnation proclaimed by the Scriptures in our liturgy requires images if it is to be fully comprehended in its lived reality. This is not to denigrate the place of the written and proclaimed word in the Church’s life – far from it! But such a theology does teach that images do something *different* than texts do; they are not merely repetitions of the written word. To see the enfleshed God and His saints communicates to us their reality and presence with us in a direct manner unattainable by the powers of the book.

This way of thinking about Christian images invites us to consider a *triangulation of revelation* in the liturgy: the proclaimed Word, the sanctified bread and wine of the Lord’s body, and the holy images painted throughout the church in which that Word is proclaimed and consumed. The icons of Christ and the saints that greet us immediately upon our entering the church remind us proleptically that the word we will hear proclaimed is one which treats not of myths and fables,

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore the Studite, *Writings on Iconoclasm*, ed. and trans. Thomas Cattoi (New York: Newman Press, 2015), 147.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*