



Iconoclasm and the Smashers  
vs.  
Iconography and the Kissers  
The Use of Images in Worship

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Creative Research Project  
submitted by  
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As a Protestant Christian artist studying the history of the Christian faith in depth for the first time, I have been impressed by the importance of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. In the Seven Ecumenical Councils, the doctrines of the early church were established. The seven are the First Council of Nicaea (325), the First Council of Constantinople (381), the Council of Ephesus (431), the Council of Chalcedon (451), the Second Council of Constantinople (553), the Third Council of Constantinople (680), and the Second Council of Nicaea (787). The doctrine of the nature of Christ still universally accepted today was accepted at the first council of Nicaea. A distinguishing conviction of the Orthodox Church is adherence to the decisions of the seven ecumenical councils from the early Christian centuries. Of particular interest to me was the ruling of the Seventh Ecumenical Council regarding icons. I believe it should be viewed as parallel in importance in establishing a doctrine of the Christian Church as was the first Ecumenical Council.

For the purposes of this paper, I would like to focus on the significance of the Seventh Ecumenical Council - the one that dealt with the issue of using icons in Christian worship. The practice of honoring holy icons is a sacred tradition of Christianity dating back a long time—at least as far back as its use of catacombs which are full of Christian Icons. They were used throughout the Church prior to the first Iconoclastic controversy period in 730-787. Iconoclasm is the practice of destroying images, especially those created for religious veneration. During this time period and again from 813-843 many artistic works of the early church art history were destroyed by “smashers.” Why was there such a controversy between the *smashers* and the *kissers* over the use of icons in worship?

There were two main iconoclastic controversies that pitted those who revered icons “kissers” against those who wished to destroy them “smashers.” Elimination of the image or representation motivated by a rejection of



physical reality and its representation is a form of iconoclasm. The first iconoclastic controversy in 726 A. D. was based on a misunderstanding and interpretation of the Second Commandment. The Byzantine Emperor Leo the Isaurian, believing the making and veneration of icons to be idolatry and contrary to the second commandment in Exodus 20:3 “You shall have **no other gods** before Me.” issued an edict against images. This charge of idolatry shows he did not understand the nature and function of icons.

*Idolatry* has been defined as worshipping a physical object or giving honor to created forms other than God. But the veneration of an icon is not an act of “worshipping” it. The icon is essentially symbolic, leading the soul from the visible to the invisible, from the symbol to the prototype or original which it represents. It is designed to lead the worshipper to that of which it is an image or symbol. The Orthodox understand that the people of God are not to create idols and worship them. “Right worship” is worship which is of God, which is Holy and that alone.

In 754 Constantine V wanted to ban the use of portraits of Christ, saints, and biblical scenes. He condemned the worship of images, calling it heretical, and ordered the destruction of a statue of Christ over one of the doors of the Chalke Gate, the main ceremonial entrance to the Great Palace of Constantinople. The name means “the Bronze Gate” and was probably given that name because of the bronze portals or gilded bronze roof tiles. This icon of Christ became a major iconodule symbol during the Byzantine Iconoclasm.<sup>1</sup> Many treasures were broken, burned, or painted over with depictions from nature, of animals, trees or birds.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the Empire this Iconoclastic movement caused serious upheaval and political unrest.

The theological understanding of the divine nature of Christ also affected the controversy because it was thought that realistic representations of Christ

<sup>1</sup> “Chalke.” 10 May 2012 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chalke>>

<sup>2</sup> “Iconoclast Controversy, The.” 28 April 2012 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecumenical\\_Patriarchate\\_of\\_Constantinople](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecumenical_Patriarchate_of_Constantinople)>.

emphasized his physical humanity over his divine nature. This prohibition was overturned at the Seventh Ecumenical Council because the reasoning was that God had presented His nature in physical form in the Person of Jesus Christ in the original Incarnation. Relations between the Western and Eastern Churches deteriorated as a result of these controversies.

In the 12th century another milder form of iconoclasm surfaced when Bernard of Clairvaux demanded that monks eliminate “all precious and beautiful things for Christ’s sake ... all things fair to see or soothing to hear, sweet to smell, delightful to taste, or pleasant to touch.”<sup>3</sup> Icons and sacred images reminded the people of God’s power, the power of truth, and the power of beauty—and the result was an interest in the power of the object itself. By the 16th century profit became the motive for selling indulgences to control people who were irrationally devoted to the images. Another version of iconoclasm reared its ugly head when the Reformers began destroying images and burning icons. Groups protesting image abuse came to America to escape persecution. The Iconoclastic practice of denying the visual arts in church was extended through Protestant denominations and the Puritan ethic of hard work and minimalism. The culture of iconoclasm that evolved from the Reformation has permeated 20th century art and has resulted in the domination of iconoclastic abstraction.

But this paradigm seems to ignore the doctrinal pronouncements of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. In Nicaea, at the Church of St. Sophia in Iznik, Turkey, this last of the “ecumenical” councils defined iconoclasm as heretical by the 350-member council during the seventh session. A declaration of faith concerning the veneration of holy images was issued. It defines the Orthodox use of icons with the following words:

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<sup>3</sup> James Romaine. *The Art of Guy Chase*. Square Halo Books, 2011. p.123

To make our confession short, we keep unchanged all the ecclesiastical traditions handed down to us, whether in writing or verbally, one of which is the making of pictorial representation, agreeable to the history on the preaching of the Gospel, a tradition useful in many respects, but especially in this, that so the incarnation of the Word of God is shown forth as real and not merely phantastic, for these have mutual indications and without doubt have also mutual significations.

We, therefore, following the royal pathway and the divinely inspired authority of our Holy Fathers and the traditions of the Catholic Church (for, as we all know, the Holy Spirit indwells her), define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials should be set forth in the holy churches of God, and on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on hangings and in pictures both in houses and by the wayside, to wit, the figure of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, of our spotless Lady, the Mother of God, of the honorable Angels, of all Saints and of all pious people. For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and

to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honorable reverence, not indeed that true worship of faith which pertains alone to the divine nature; but to these, as to the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross and to the Book of the Gospels and to the other holy objects, incense and lights may be offered according to ancient pious custom. For the honor which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented.<sup>4</sup>

This ruling has affected the worship of God in Orthodox Churches ever since that council in 787. Once the iconoclast heresy directed against veneration of saints and their holy images was overthrown, the Orthodox became zealous in writing about the champions of Orthodoxy. The calendar was completed, and the holy hymnographers ordered the church services that have been retained ever since. “But the life of a saint cannot be reduced to an article in a Dictionary of Biography or to a chapter in Church History; it is a verbal icon of the saint that, while telling the story as accurately as possible, lets the hidden aspect of the work of the Grace of God in the saint shine through. Just as an icon can only be venerated in the context of worship with the appropriate dispositions, so the life of a saint can only be read in the Church with the eyes of faith and not according to the criteria of secular scholarship. This does not imply credulity but spiritual awareness of the mystery of Christ in us. The lives of saints, their exploits and miracles were passed down through oral tradition that transfigures them in iconography and in hagiography (biography or veneration of saints), so that they become

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<sup>4</sup> Mark A. Noll. *Turning Points*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1997, 2000. p.137

a genuine means of entering into communion with God and with His saints. What some people have described as ‘uncertain stories and legends’ are, in fact, the true story of Man in his relation to God that the tradition of the Church brings to us in its own particular way.”<sup>5</sup>

As a result of The Seventh Ecumenical Council’s Triumph of Orthodoxy: Restoration of the Holy Icons is celebrated as the culmination of the Church’s battles against heresy on two Sundays in the church year, the first Sunday of Great Lent, the fast that leads up to Pascha (Easter) and the council itself is commemorated on the Sunday closest to October 11 (the Sunday on or after October 8). Here are words to a hymn from the *Triodion* that is chanted on the eve of the Sunday of Orthodoxy when the victory over Iconoclasm is commemorated:

“The Church of Christ is now embellished like a bride, having been adorned with icons of holy form; and it calls all together spiritually; let us come and celebrate together joyfully with concord and faith, magnifying the Lord.”

Do you think it is OK to make or have an icon? Is it permissible to kiss an icon or venerate them? Before you answer these questions please listen to *The Triumph of Orthodoxy* by Father Thomas Hopko in this link to Ancient Faith Radio [http://ancientfaith.com/podcasts/hopko/the\\_triumph\\_of\\_orthodoxy](http://ancientfaith.com/podcasts/hopko/the_triumph_of_orthodoxy) as he explains why Orthodox Christians keep and venerate icons.<sup>6</sup>

The function of Icons in the Eastern Orthodox Church and the purposes they serve are featured in an online article entitled *The Functions of Icons* by Dr. Constanine Cavarnos. His list includes:

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5 “Iconoclast Controversy, The.” 28 April 2012 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecumenical\\_Patriarchate\\_of\\_Constantinople](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecumenical_Patriarchate_of_Constantinople)>.

6 “Triumph of Orthodoxy, The.” 17 Mar. 2008 <[http://ancientfaith.com/podcasts/hopko/the\\_triumph\\_of\\_orthodoxy](http://ancientfaith.com/podcasts/hopko/the_triumph_of_orthodoxy)>.



1) They enhance the beauty of the church. «As a house of prayer» the church should bear the impress of holiness.

2) They serve to instruct the faithful in the Christian religion. Since not everyone is literate, the Incarnation of our Lord, His association with men, His miracles, His Crucifixion, His Resurrection, and so on, should be represented on icons. And St. Photios, Patriarch of Constantinople, says: «Just as speech is transmitted by hearing, so a form through sight is imprinted upon the tablets of the soul, giving to those whose apprehension is not soiled by wicked doctrines a representation of knowledge consonant with piety.»<sup>7</sup> Photios said that icons not only teach but in some instances they are more vivid than written accounts and can be a superior means of instruction. In a composition such as the Nativity, the Raising of Lazarus, or the Crucifixion the icon presents simultaneously and concisely many things—a place, persons, and objects—that would take a long time to describe in words.

3) They serve to remind us of truths, aims and values of the Christian faith and awaken us with respect to them. John Damascene summed up this function when he called them concise memorials (*hypomneseis*) that is concise means of remembering. He gives the following example: “Many times, doubtless, when we do not have in mind the Passion of our Lord, upon seeing the icon of Christ’s Crucifixion, we recall His saving suffering.”<sup>8</sup>

4) They lift us to the prototype to a higher level of consciousness of thought and feeling. The prototypes of the Icons of Christ, the Apostles, the Martyrs and Saints enjoy a higher level of being than we do in our ordinary lives. When we see their Icons we recall their superior character and we think

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<sup>7</sup> “Functions of Icons, The.” Dr. Constantine Carvanos This is Chapter III from *Orthodox Iconography* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Modern Greek and Byzantine Studies, 1992 [1977]), pp. 30-35. Reprinted with the kind permission of Dr. Cavarnos. 28 April 2012 <[http://orthodoxinfo.com/general/icon\\_function.aspx](http://orthodoxinfo.com/general/icon_function.aspx)>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

pure thoughts. The icon is not an end unto itself but is a symbol carrying us beyond itself. As St. John Damascene remarks, “we are led by perceptible icons to the contemplation of the divine and spiritual.”<sup>9</sup> It is designed to lead us from the physical and psychophysical to the spiritual realm. And hence it is, as St. John Damascene says, a pattern (*typos*) of something heavenly.<sup>10</sup>

5) They stir us up to imitate the virtues of holy personages. Thus, one of the decrees of the Seventh Ecumenical Synod—the Synod that was convoked specially to settle the dispute between the iconoclasts and those who defended the veneration of holy icons—says: “The more continually holy personages are seen in icons, the more are the beholders lifted up to the memory of the prototypes and to an aspiration after them.”<sup>11</sup>

6) They help to transform our character, our whole being, to help sanctify us. They effect this by instructing us, reminding us, uplifting us, and stirring us up morally and spiritually. We become like that which we habitually contemplate. True icons focus the distracted soul of man on spiritual perfection, on the divine.

7) It is a means of worship and veneration. Like sacred hymns and music, the icon is a means of worshipping God and venerating His saints. It is essentially symbolic, leading the soul from the visible to the invisible, from the symbol to the prototype or original which it represents. The icon is an image or symbol, and is designed to lead us to that of which it is an image or symbol, whereas an idol lacks this power of the authentic symbol; and the veneration of an icon is not an act of “worshipping” it. John Damascene traces the tradition of honorable reverence of sacred objects back to the Mosaic people, who “venerated on all hands the tabernacle which was an image and type of

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

heavenly things, or rather of the whole creation.”<sup>12</sup>

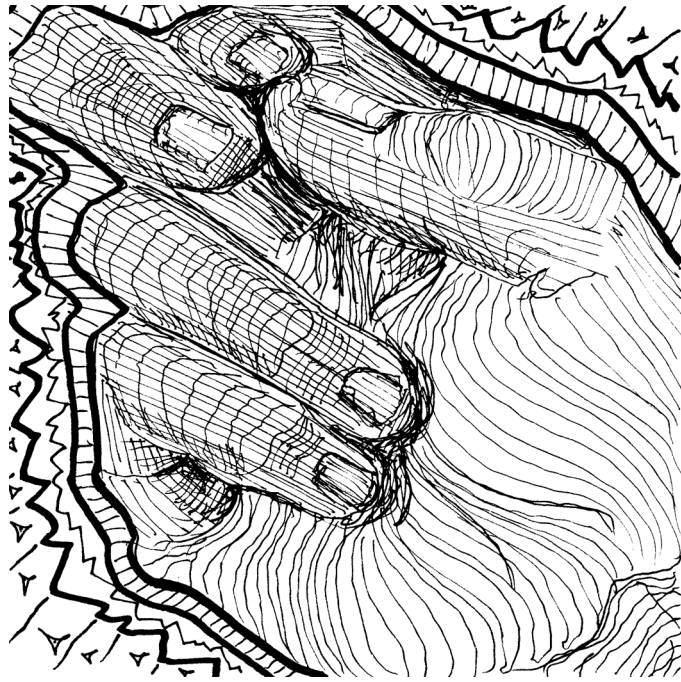
The following remark of John Damascene has a bearing on several of the functions served by icons: “I enter the common place-of-therapy of souls, the church, choked as it were by the thorns of worldly thoughts. The bloom of painting attracts me, it delights my sight like a meadow, and secretly evokes in my soul the desire to glorify God. I behold the fortitude of the martyr, the crowns awarded, and my zeal is aroused like fire; I fall down and worship God through the martyr, and receive salvation.” When the important functions of icons are ignored and the crucial distinction between honorable reverence and worship is not understood, iconoclasm, the condemnation of icons, is a result.

Over the last thirty years the issues that surround the development of contemporary art have been pictorial representation, conceptual methods, the definition of “Christian” art, the devotional nature of the artist and his calling, and most importantly, the question of how one finds meaning through what they make.<sup>13</sup> I recently read a new book, *The Art of Guy Chase* about an artist who died last year. The cover design of the book was intriguing. It showed a hand-painted grid over a printed icon. It impressed me with how people sometimes view iconography at arm’s length, through the gridwork of their own preconceived ideas. The grid gets in the way of really seeing the purpose for which the icon was created. The most recent issue of CIVA SEEN featured an article about this artist and his artwork. CIVA (Christians in the Visual Arts) was established in 1979. “CIVA and its members are called to create work, devoted to the Church, and fully present in culture.”

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Cory, *SEENJournal*. Wenham, MA: Christians in the Visual Arts XI.1 2011 Matter + Spirit Issue. p.7



“Flee presumption and revere the things of God.”  
Drawing by Carolyn Rock on 3/19/2012

As a member of CIVA, “called to create work” how does the art I am creating relate to being “fully present in culture?” and how can this art be used to worship God biblically? This past Lent I did a series of daily drawings while meditating on Him and reading scripture. One of the symbols the Orthodox Christians use in worship is a symbolic hand gesture of the right hand giving testimony to the Trinity and dual natures of Jesus Christ. The image on this page is one of the drawings made this year before Easter. Notice how the thumb, index and middle fingers touch each other. This represents the Trinity, Three Persons in One Nature. See how the fourth finger and pinky curl under and touch the inside of the palm? This represents the two natures in the One Person of Jesus Christ. How does drawing the symbolic gesture help me or others worship God biblically? Art can direct us into worship.

This drawing is a reminder to me of the most important fundamental Christian doctrine affirmed in 451 at the Council of Chalcedon. “Christ was a united and integrated person, that he was both God and man, that his human and divine natures were not confused, and that these natures were harmoniously joined in a single individual.”<sup>14</sup>

Upon entering the sanctuary of an Orthodox church and repeatedly during the service, worshippers use the sign of the cross on their bodies with their right hand in this position. They touch their forehead, (acknowledging God, the Father) the breastplate, (acknowledging God, the Son) and the right shoulder then the left shoulder, (acknowledging the Holy Spirit). It is not only a beautiful symbol but it is a way to worship God with your body. Christians wear crosses as jewelry, we hang crosses in our homes, architects put them on church steeples. We decorate the graves of loved ones with them on Memorial Day so why does it seem so strange to us to use our hands to cross our bodies in recognition of the One Who is Lord of all?

David Khorey, a deacon at St. Nicholas Antiochian Orthodox Church shared these words on the second Sunday of Easter that gave me new insight into another meaning of icons, “the living icons that each of us are meant to be.”

*“When I come into the Church on Sunday morning  
the quiet emptiness of it is the emptiness of the new  
tomb where the angel announced to the women that  
He is risen. Indeed the church is never truly empty, but  
rather as long as the body and blood of Christ is here  
  
as it always is reserved in the tabernacle on the altar  
He is here attended by the angels and saints who we  
see depicted in the icons of the Church, and as long*

<sup>14</sup> Mark A. Noll. *Turning Points*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1997, 2000. p.77



*as the icons are here the presence of the Lord and his saints is made manifest to us in those images beyond which we encounter the heavenly here and now.*

*And as the church fills with the living icons that each of us are meant to be, each of us with the potential of our vocation in some degree working to attain the fullness of the measure of Christ with faith and in service, whether that vocation be to serve at the Lord's table, or to serve at others', or to serve our parents and children and spouse, or those sick and in need, or to help find the vocations of others which is itself a great vocation, or to be a rock to those around you, to be a pillar of the community who really holds it up, I start to realize we too are part of the communion of saints, the cloud of witnesses that itself preaches the Gospel by its very existence through the ages.*

*And it is with that cloud of witnesses that I pray the petitions of the church. When I say let "us" pray to the Lord, we do that together, even with the saints. Each time I cense the people I sense the living icon of Christ whose image they bear and I cense their personal prayers so that they might rise like incense ..."<sup>15</sup>*

As a result of my research into the controversy surrounding the Seventh Ecumenical Council and the opportunity for contemporary worship with Orthodox Christians today I find that if required to render a verdict concerning whether the "Smashers" were right or the "Kissers" were right

<sup>15</sup> David Khorey. Deacon sermon. 28 April 2012 Grand Rapids, MI: St Nicholas Antiochian Orthodox Church.

I would have to side with the “Kissers.” I’ve come to believe that the ancient icons as well as contemporary Christian art can help to lead us into the Presence of God and add a meaningful element to the true worship of God with mind, body and soul.

The purpose for my research on this topic was to understand the controversy between the “smashers” verses the “kissers” over the use of icons in worship and to present how the ruling of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 affects the worship of God today. As a result of this project my husband and I travelled to Parma, Ohio to see The Holy Trinity Orthodox Church. The main hallway is filled with biblical images and scripture references from the book of Revelation. Every square inch of the interior sanctuary is laden with exquisite beauty. It took Priest Theodore Jurewicz, the iconographer six years to paint this masterpiece. The art in this extraordinary church “makes visible the invisible” and draws people to worship God biblically. The unique exterior artistry of the building features colorful mosaics and stunning architectural details. To take the virtual tour of this church and view the 63 image Revelation slideshow on their church website go to:

[http://www.holy-trin.org/news\\_100218\\_3.html](http://www.holy-trin.org/news_100218_3.html)

The study of ancient church history and the theology behind early Christian worship and seeing some contemporary Orthodox churches have given me an even greater appreciation of how “Christian” art can enhance worship. As a result of this research project, I want all of my future Christian art projects to reflect the truth and the power of the legacy that I have discovered in my study. Specifically, I am currently creating a glass mosaic based on the ancient mosaic *Christ Pantocrator*.

Go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XddLDufkaig> to see how a contemporary Orthodox Church overcame a modern example of iconoclasm.

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“Flee presumption and revere the things of God.” Drawing by Carolyn Rock on 3/19/2012

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