The Image of Christ in the Early Church: A Study of the Divine Portrait

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Abstract:

The face of Christ in art draws attention and veneration, prompting viewers to consider the incarnate form that Jesus possessed when walking this earth. A portrait of Christ depicts His face for the specific purpose of contemplation, and constitutes a unique and powerful genre in Christian art. However, the divine image of Christ as a portrait does not appear until the late fourth century, and this timing is evidence of early theological controversies in the church regarding divine pictures. The lack of holy portraits can be attributed to fears of idolatry, as well as both Jewish and Greek concepts of an invisible God. Theological debate and development regarding the nature of Jesus Christ from the fourth through the eighth centuries resulted in the writings of Saint John of Damascus, who defended holy portraits of Christ on the basis of the incarnation. This paper presents the case that the incarnation makes images of Christ necessarily possible, and therefore justifies reverent contemplation of the divine portrait.

"Had He not had something heavenly in His face and His eyes, the apostles never would have followed Him at once, nor would those who came to arrest Him have fallen to the ground."

— St. Jerome[1]

[1] Thomas, Denis. *The Face of Christ*, 12.

Introduction

Contemplating the face of Christ is a profound process. The Creator incarnate, the beloved Savior, lived as a person with features and expressions. He smiled, and He wept. People touched His face, kissed His cheek, and recognized Him. Realizing this, and imagining it, ushers forth earnest and ardent love for the man who was Jesus of Nazareth. The Bible conspicuously lacks physical descriptions of the Messiah, yet there exists a distinct image of Christ ingrained within Christian tradition and even secular culture. There are dozens of niches that can be explored regarding His image. After considering multiple directions, this paper arrived at the earliest portraits of Christ and the conflicts that surrounded them.

The controversies prompted by divine portraits of Christ were legitimate to a point, but the incarnation makes divine portraits necessarily possible. The divine portrait is a unique subset of Christian art, and because of its prevalence throughout the world, it is worth studying. The terms ‘divine portrait’ and ‘icon’ will be used synonymously, both referring exclusively to images of Jesus Christ, unless otherwise specified. The topic of the icon of Christ is large in scope, ranging from the very beginnings of Christianity to the modern day, across Europe and the globe, and between Western Christianity and the church of the East. It is associated with both the material pictures of Christ and with the broader theological concept of His Image as it relates to God.

An interest in the development of the picture of Christ led to a study of early Christian art. It seemed that if there existed at all an accurate picture of Christ, it would be found in the very first art created. However, it is evident that this cannot be the case. Partially because Christian art of any sort did not begin to appear until approximately 200 A.D., long after

firsthand, ‘accurate’ representations could be created. The earliest pictures of Christ were examined for features and characteristics that would have created the familiar modern image, but this search was not fruitful. This was due to the fact that the earliest pieces were not portraits of Him, but rather symbolic representations. For example, the image of the Good Shepherd was commonly used as a Christian symbol in the earliest works. This symbol delivers a message, but it does not depict Christ for His own sake. Thus the pursuit of the actual features of the man Jesus Christ was set aside. Though it would be a fascinating subject, the study of the physical appearance of Jesus would be deeply speculative, relying on legends and unverifiable reports. It would also likely lead to an examination of the material art and styles, rather than the ideas and theology surrounding divine art.

Fig. 1. The Good Shepherd, Catacombs of St. Callixtus, Rome, 3rd century fresco (Photo: Public Domain)

And so the earliest history of the divine portrait, or icon, of Christ was examined. An icon is defined as “a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration.”[2] Both the inherent representative and venerative aspects of the icon provoked concern in the church. The divine image of Christ as a portrait does not appear until the late fourth century, and this timing is evidence of the earliest controversies in the church regarding divine pictures. Studying these controversies provides a response to the question of the lack of portrait art, and lays a foundation for understanding the later iconoclastic controversy of the eighth century. The writings of Saint John of Damascus impart essential ideas that help determine the necessary

[2] New Oxford American Dictionary.

possibility of the portrait of Christ. Reviewing the subsequent veneration of Christ's icon that occurred in the Byzantine tradition offers a conclusion to the study of the early divine portrait.

The Absent Image and the Earliest Concerns

The absence of distinctly Christian art before the 200s A.D. is enigmatic. An analysis of the influences contributing to the lack of early Christian art coincides with the study of early portraiture of Christ. Distinguishing exactly what counts as a portrait of Christ is imperative.

The Callistus catacombs, southeast of Rome, are the richest source of the earliest Christian art, dating back to approximately 200 A.D. Icons representing Jesus do appear in these catacombs, such as the Good Shepherd previously mentioned. But such depictions do not count as portraits. The Good Shepherd was meant as a "metaphor expressing the qualities of Jesus as a loving caretaker of souls."[3] Scholar Robin Jensen differentiates between these images and the specific portrait images that emerged in the late fourth century. "Visual portraits… are different from narrative or symbolic images, in that their primary purpose is to present an individual human (or divine) countenance to viewers for contemplation. They usually are presented frontally, sometimes as full figures, but often only the bust or face."[4] The face of Christ presented as a portrait developed a unique genre of Christian art. The holy portrait holds immense power, and so from the very beginning it has been a subject of controversy.

The lack of the holy portrait of Christ in the first centuries of the church can be attributed to various factors. These can be summarized into two central problems: firstly, that the image of Christ could lead to idolatry, and secondly, that divine portraiture was an attempt to depict that

[3] Jensen, Robin Margaret. *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity*, 23.

[4] Jensen, *Face to Face*, 26.

which cannot be depicted. The influences that led to and impacted these problems are twofold, both Jewish and pagan. The effect of these influences can be observed in examples of early Christians apologetics on the issue of art, which began appearing in the early second century, matching the period of time in which Christian visual artistic depictions first appeared.

When depicting a holy figure, there is always the concern that the depiction will lead to idolatry. Depictions of Christ, not as a symbol or a character in a narrative, but as a portrait, are the most dangerous. When separated from any narrative context, the face of Christ seemed bound to become an idol. The early Christians recognized the inherent danger of Christ's isolated image, and this justified their avoidance. Images lead to icons, which became portraits, which became idols.

It is necessary to consider the Jewish influence on the early Christians. Most would assume that Jewish tradition and philosophy was a central reason for the delay in Christian art. From the Second Commandment, according to the Reformed enumeration, "You shall not make for yourself a carved 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."[5] The Mosaic law made it abundantly clear that icons were prohibited, and the Judeo-Christian culture was unique among nations in that it forbade the worship of idols. There are examples of the implementation of images in the Old Testament which might be taken as an exception to this law, such as the depiction of cherubim on the ark of the covenant.[6] However, these depictions were commanded by God, and did not offer the same sort of temptation as man-made idols. The Mosaic prohibition protected the people of

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[5] Exodus 20:4 (English Standard Version).

[6] Found in Exodus 25:10-22.

Israel and Christians from polytheism and prevented them from diverting their worship away from the one true God.

The idolatrous pagan environment in which they inhabited also dissuaded Christians from icons. The worship of images has always been rampant in paganism throughout history, and so Christians became inclined to thoroughly reject the practice. "The earliest Christian writers [pointed] out inherent dangers that [were] attached to the making or even admiration of things that were made for polytheistic cult. Given the wide distribution of such objects in the everyday world, even the most stalwart Christinas might be implicated in a kind of accidental idolatry, even if they tried to steer clear of anything that might tempt or unwittingly taint them."[7] And so there was a general prohibition of icons among Christians. However, the most problematic icons depicted the deity, particularly as a portrait.

For a long period of time, scholars assumed that the wariness towards images which were uncomfortably near to idols was the central determinant in the lack of Christian art.[8] However, the situation is more nuanced, as argued in recent scholarship by such authors as Paul Corby Finney and the previously mentioned Robin Jensen. They make the case that "the Israelite prohibition of images, which was a prephilosophical, aniconic taboo, influenced early Christianity less than is commonly presumed."[9] The term aniconic refers to a direct opposition to images, and usually describes a religion or a culture.[10] The Jewish aniconic influence should be acknowledged, but should not be considered the sole disruptor of early Christian art. Finney and

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[7] Jensen, *Face to Face*, 14.

[8] One of the most influential scholars who propagated this view was Henry Chadwick, in his prominent book *The Early Church*. Other proponents included theologians Theodor Klauser and Hugo Koch.

[9] Finney, Paul Corby. *The Invisible God*, xi.

[10] Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

Jensen describe other influences instead, including the notion of the invisible God, which is the second major issue with divine portraiture.

This second problem with portraiture again has both Jewish and pagan foundations. In Jewish culture, God existed simply as a being who could not be seen, and who therefore could never be portrayed. From Exodus 33:20, when Moses asks for the Lord to reveal His glory, He responds, "'you cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live.'"[11] He was an invisible God, utterly immaterial and existing as a pure and perfect spiritual entity. Beyond their taboo of icons in order to prevent idolatry, for the Jews it was an axiomatic fact that God could not be seen, and could not be depicted. Images are forbidden for this very reason in Deuteronomy 4:15-18: "You saw no form of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below."[12] If no one knows what God looks like, how can He be faithfully portrayed? Though traditionally Jewish, a parallel concept of the invisible deity existed in Greek thinking, and this further shaped early Christian beliefs.

Hellenistic philosophy had a significant influence upon the early Christians, and it is important to take these ideas into consideration, since they were conducive to the philosophical foundation for representing all things divine. "The objection to portrait images, as with earlier objections to visual art in general, drew as much upon the classical philosophical tradition as

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[11] Exodus 33:20 (English Standard Version).

[12] Deuteronomy 4:15-18 (New International Version).

upon any ancient Jewish precedents."[13] Indeed, Paul Corby Finney takes the stance that the Greek influence was *more* significant than the Jewish on the matter of divine depictions. Regarding the Greeks, he writes, "as I have already suggested, the consensus is misleading—Greek precedents are of much greater importance for our subject than Jewish models."[14]

The Greco-Roman tradition of imagery was perhaps the pinnacle of representational divine incarnations— idealized and heroic, but still with an emphasis on realism. "The great divine figures represented on the Parthenon possess a superhuman and yet human majesty within themselves."[15] These noble and attractive visages have existed as long as humans have been creating art. The portraits of the Greco-Roman gods were the vessels of their very existence, created wholly for the sake of the deities themselves. "The concept of gods who walk among men, and who suffer earthly pains, was familiar throughout the Hellenic world, enshrined in legend and in the mythic history of mankind's not-too-distant past."[16] To depict these divine characters is a human inclination, one that even Plato acknowledges. However, Plato also posits that the human attempt to properly depict the divine is impossible.

In his book *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, Alain Besançon writes specifically of Plato's contribution to ideas of divine art: "[He] put forward two contrary imperatives, postulated two incoercible facts about our nature: first that we must look towards the divine, that it alone is worth contemplating; and second, that representing it is futile,

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[13] Jensen, *Face to Face*, 27.

[14] Finney, *The Invisible God*, 15.

[15] Besançon, Alain. *The Forbidden Image*, 16.

[16] Thomas, *The Face of Christ*, 29.

sacrilegious, inconceivable."[17] Plato writes in his dialogue *Phaedrus*, speaking of 'the divine intelligence': "But of the heaven which is above the heavens, what earthly poet ever did or ever will sing worthily? It is such as I will describe; for I must dare to speak the truth, when truth is my theme. There abides the very being with which true knowledge is concerned; the colorless, formless, intangible essence, visible only to mind, the pilot of the soul."[18] Plato agreed that the divine was unattainable, but he does consider the inclination of man towards the artistic and the beautiful. In his *Symposium*, he writes "But what if man had eyes to see the true beauty—the divine beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colors and vanities of human life—thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty simple and divine?"[19] This divine beauty attracts humans in a deep and inherent way, and Plato acknowledges this. However, the method by which this beauty is beheld is "with the eye of the mind."[20] This would mean that for Plato, a portrait would not be a possible or suitable way to depict a deity, and so it remains a deceptive mechanism, which should be avoided.

This philosophy aligns with Jewish and early Christian thought. Authors such as Clement of Alexandria in the second century integrated Greek and Jewish thinking in order to argue that God was invisible. In his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, he employs vivid language to describe the inaccessibility of God. "God is One, that He is unbegotten and indestructible, and that somewhere on high in the outermost spaces of the heavens, in His own private watch-tower,

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[17] Besançon, *The Forbidden Image*, 1.

[18] Plato, *Plato: Complete Works: Phaedrus*, 1219.

[19] Plato, *Symposium*, 1383-4.

[20] Plato, *Symposium*, 1384.

He truly exists for ever… For not even the sun could ever show us the true God."[21] Clement cites many Greek philosophers and poets alongside Hebrew prophets and theologians to demonstrate the invisibility and unattainable perfection of God. When writing about the human capability of knowing God, he invokes both Plato and Moses in order to argue that: "if one expects to apprehend all things by the senses, he has fallen far from the truth… For it is evident that no one during the period of life has been able to apprehend God clearly. But the pure in heart shall see God, Matthew 5:8, when they arrive at the final perfection."[22] And so the early Christian church, besides being cautious of idolatry, would also have been saturated in the idea that God was unrepresentable, from both Jewish and Hellenistic philosophy.

The Theological Shift and the Possible Portrait of Christ

Now, with an understanding of why early Christians might have avoided portraits of Christ, the sudden and widespread appearance of Christian art in the fourth and fifth centuries must be explained. Distinctly Christian art did first emerge in small amounts during the 200s A.D., but did not become substantial until the mid- to late-300s. This moment in time is distinctly marked by a veritable explosion of Christian art of all forms. "This was one of the most exciting periods in the history of Christian art, one of diversity and experiment, and the fourth and fifth centuries are full of exuberant vitality."[23]

This exhilarating change can be partially, if not mostly, attributed to a single event. Constantine and the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. permanently altered Christian art in every way.

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[21] Clement of Alexandria. *The Complete Works of Clement of Alexandria: Exhortation to the Greeks, Chapter VI*, 375-376.

[22] Clement. *The Complete Works: Miscellaneous, Book V, Chapter I*, 1983-1984.

[23] Gough, Michael. *The Origins of Christian Art*, 52.

All forms of distinctly Christian art that can be observed today, in architecture, painting, mosaic, and sculpture, became possible on a broad scale because of the drastic shift in the social circumstances of the Christians. "Supported by the largesse of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, Christian communities in cities across the Roman Empire began to construct church buildings in earnest."[24] With a benevolent Empire and a state-funded church, Christian art became possible and widespread. The social shifts in the fourth century allowed the church freedom and dominion for the first time, granting the ability to establish a material presence and individual culture of its own, under the magnanimous eye of the government.

Along with the provision of material means for art, the state-sanctioned church allowed for another issue to be overcome. "The fear of pagan idolatry and religion was no longer so pronounced in a world that was rapidly becoming dominantly Christian…"[25] And so the problem of idolatry in portraits of the divine was virtually solved. The fourth and fifth centuries saw images of Christ as they had never been seen before. Christ was no longer limited to symbolic representations, with His form only present in narratives or metaphors. His face began to appear as a portrait, presented for its own sake. His figure stands alone, as a bust or simply as a face, and the uniqueness of these

Fig. 2. Bust of Christ between Alpha and Omega, Catacomb of Commodilla, Rome, late 4th century. (Photo: Sonia Halliday Photo Library)

[24] Wilken, Robert Louis, *Early Christian Thought*, 241.

[25] Jensen, *Face to Face*, 172.

images is immediately evident. Two early examples of Christ's portrait include the bust of Christ from the Catacomb of Commodilla and the marble tile figure from the Ostia Antica. Both are excellent samples of early portrait art, providing a clear picture of Jesus alone. The viewer understands that Christ's image is individual, recognizable not by the scene in which He is set, or by His actions depicted, but by His face alone. "Recognition is based not only on external details but… on a whole complex of … signs that add up to identity and allow the viewer to claim: "I'd know her/him anywhere.""[26] Portrait art needed to be regarded with unique distinction, however, as it still posed potential innate danger. During the fourth century there were not only material changes in the production of portraits of Christ, but also developments in the theology surrounding such images.

Fig. 3. Opus sectile bust of Christ, Ostia Antica, Rome, late 4th century. (Photo: Aurea Roma)

The arrival of Christ Incarnate irrevocably transformed the theology of the invisible God. Suddenly, the deity was undeniably material, visible, and *human*. Though the belief that God was invisible had been authoritative, Christians needed to deal with the reality that their God had indeed become flesh. Many verses in the New Testament present this fact, distinguishing the Incarnate Christ. From Philippians 2:7-8, "[He] emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."[27] The apostle John writes: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which

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[26] Jensen, *Face to Face*, 198.

[27] Philippians 2:7-8, (English Standard Version).

we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."[28] It was universally accepted that God the Father was an invisible deity, unable to be represented. However, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."[29] He is the Word, who "became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."[30] It is clear in the Bible that the ability to see Christ was essential. From John 12:45, "And whoever sees Me sees the One who sent Me."[31] And in John 14:7, "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him."[32]

The fourth century explosion of Christian portrait art specifically aligns with a consequential and tumultuous period in Christian theology regarding Christ's very nature. "These images began to appear just at the same time that the debate over the union and distinction of the divine and human natures in the incarnate Logos really emerged with its full intensity."[33] This exploration and debate over the theology of the incarnation is observed in several Christian writers and apologists. "The theology of the church fathers, governing every image yet to be made, set the conditions of possibility or impossibility for the divine image, for the material artwork in which that image is captured, or, simply, for the changes that image introduces in the contemplative soul."[34]

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[28] 1 John 1:1 (New International Version).

[29] Colossians 1:15 (New International Version).

[30] John 1:14 (New International Version).

[31] John 12:45 (Berean Study Bible).

[32] John 14:7 (English Standard Version).

[33] Jensen, *Face to Face*, 172.

[34] Besançon, *The Forbidden Image*, 2.

The works of the Alexandrian theologian Athanasius are particularly important. His primary treatise, *On the Incarnation*, deals directly with matters regarding the importance of the corporeal body of Christ, which can be directly related to the divine portrait. Athanasius' high views of the image of God and his analogy between souls, salvation, and artistry all suggest that he probably would not have opposed the creation of images. Athanasius writes on the physical Image of God that was Jesus Christ:

> What, then, was God to do? What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His Image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him? And how could this be done save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Savior Jesus Christ? Men could not have done it, for they are only made after the Image; nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father Who could recreate man made after the Image.[35]

He follows this segment with the pertinent analogy of a painted portrait that must be restored, just as humans must be renewed in the Image of God. "For Athanasius the Incarnate One was necessarily visible because visibility was essential to His saving mission."[36] Granting the necessity of the incarnation for salvation, Athanasius postulates that visibility is also necessary for salvation. For humankind to be restored to the Image of God, Christ must have *been* visible, in order for His likeness to be redrawn. "Even so was it with the All-holy Son of God. He, the Image of the Father, came and dwelt in our midst, in order that He might renew mankind made after Himself…"[37] If the visibility of the Incarnate Christ is necessary for salvation, this would cause the Incarnation to be necessarily visible.

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[35] St. Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*, 9.

[36] Jensen, *Face to Face*, 101.

[37] Athanasius, *Incarnation*, 9.

Visibility makes portraits possible, and Christ, being Incarnate, was necessarily visible. Therefore, portraits of Christ are possible. With the question of the nature of Christ prominent among early Christians during this time, the church's artistic culture reflected the theological reckoning that occurred. As early Christians reacted to shifting theologies regarding Christ's nature, it is not surprising that He would begin to appear as a portrait.

This paper cannot sufficiently review the nuances of the theological movement during the fourth and fifth centuries due to their inherent complexity. Nevertheless, the development of such ideas regarding the nature and incarnation of Christ prompted the production of divine portraiture in the church. "Jesus… regularly appears in Christian visual art from the late first century onwards, first as a figure in narrative images… and then—at the end of the fourth century—in a portrait image that showed His face alone."[38] The physical Incarnate form of Christ made divine portraiture of the Savior possible. The development of theology during this time was greatly influential on the burgeoning style of Christian art, particularly in determining its subjects, as seen in the appearance of divine portraits of Christ. "The shift from a dominance of symbolic and narrative art to the emergence of and emphasis on the portrait or iconic images must be explained by theological as well as cultural and political forces that shaped the nature and future of Christianity as an established religion of the Empire."[39] As theology considered the bounds and implications of the Incarnate Christ, and determined His necessary visibility, it became possible to overcome the problem of the invisible God.

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[38] Jensen, *Face to Face*, 131.

[39] Jensen, *Face to Face*, 172.

The First Iconoclastic Crisis and the Necessary Portrait of Christ

With the possibility of a portrait of Christ demonstrated, the divine image soon became a popular and recognizable icon. During this time, the familiar image of Christ was established. "With few exceptions Christian leaders welcomed paintings in the churches, and bishops praised the work of these artists."[40] Christian images, whether of saints, martyrs, Mary, or Biblical characters, certainly hold a particular kind of power, as evidenced in the history of Christian art. Icons draw attention, and veneration. Veneration is defined as: "the feeling of one who venerates; a high degree of respect and reverence; an exalted feeling or sentiment excited by the dignity, wisdom, and goodness of a person, or by the sacredness of his character."[41] Holy icons, whether pagan or Christian, hold this inherent magnetic power that impels reverence, inspires exaltation, and induces worship. Images of Jesus are especially potent, whether inducing a sense of almighty power, as in the Pantocrator images, or evoking deep poignance, with images of the Crucifixion. Even simple images of the face of the Lord elicit the profound reminder that Jesus, the Messiah, walked this earth. He entered this world as a human, interacted with other humans, and died as a human. He existed in the physical body of a man, visible and material, and yet He was miraculous, God in the flesh. He was not an ordinary mortal. Knowing this, the portrait of Christ demands distinction.

Artists attempted to discover a way to display both His humanity and His divinity, uniting His natures in a distinguishable way that could be understood by any viewer. "The fusion… between man and god in the Christian context calls for a supreme leap of the artist's

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[40] Wilkens, *Early Christian Thought*, 241.

[41] The Century Dictionary.

imagination."[42] Details such as the cruciform halo express divinity, and along with other elements became a traditional way to mark Christ as God. His human nature is displayed alongside His divine characteristics by using other artistic devices, such as unaltered human features and normal proportions. It is rare, especially in the East, that Jesus' physical form as a man is depicted as unhuman. If pictured with others, His stature and traits are usually comparable to those of His companions.

One of the first icons of Jesus that exhibits both His humanity and His divinity is the Christ Pantocrator from St. Catherine's Monastery. A distinct Byzantine image, the Pantocrator (Christ Almighty) depicts Christ as the austere, yet compassionate, judge of mankind. The example from St. Catherine's is the oldest known Pantocrator image, and well represents Christ's human and heavenly natures. His strong, dark features on the right side of the image, and the Gospel that He bears, signify His divine judgment. His milder characteristics on the left half of the picture and His hand held up in blessing illustrate His human qualities. This image demonstrates how portraits depict the nature of Christ as simultaneously holy and human.

Fig. 4. Christ Pantocrator, Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, 6th century. (Photo: Public Domain)

The church also informed a broader audience by conveying the nature of Christ through art. "A painting gave the

[42] Thomas, *The Face of Christ*, 20.

faithful an image to carry in the mind and served as a book for those who could not read."[43] Using these portraits as beautiful and practical tools to educate allowed the church to establish the distinctively Christian portrait of Christ, and they utilized it with earnestness and zeal. The church had overcome the problems with the icon enough so that it was able to start producing such images, and these were widely met with enthusiasm. "The veneration of icons is the church's most palpable way of proclaiming that God appeared in human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ."[44] The veneration of Christ's image that ensued in the early church was fervent, and the portrait of Christ manifested itself as a cherished tradition. However, the controversy surrounding it was never truly resolved.

Deep reverence toward the holy portrait resurfaced previous problems. "As Christian devotion to icons became more fervent, it seemed, at least to some, that veneration of icons bordered on idolatry."[45] In both the eighth and ninth centuries, movements arose in opposition to icons. These differed from the earlier influences and wariness that dissuaded Christians from creating portrait art, and art in general. They were an active crusade against the depiction of Christ. The group behind this effort was dubbed the iconoclasts, after the Greek term *eikonoklastēs*, meaning 'to break likenesses'.[46] The old problems of idolatry and inaccessible divinity emerged once more, with a tangible impact more drastic than the original prevention of the creation of pictures. "Iconoclasm considered itself a purification of the church, a return to its

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[43] Wilkens, *Early Christian Thought*, 241.

[44] Wilkens, *Early Christian Thought*, 246.

[45] Wilkens, *Early Christian Thought*, 242.

[46] The New Oxford American Dictionary.

true tradition, which had been corrupted by iconolatry."[47] This purification resulted in vicious campaigns, which for the first time actually destroyed divine images across the church. Emperor Leo III brought about dramatic reforms against icons, delivering edicts against the veneration of such images, and dictating the removal of Christ's portrait from the Golden Gate of the imperial palace in 730 A.D.

The first iconoclastic crisis began in the early eighth century, and persisted, eventually morphing into a second crisis in the ninth century. The resultant civil war wreaked catastrophe upon the holy art of the church, demolishing material representations, and triggering bitter quarrels among the influential and powerful Christians of the time. This moment was troubling, for once again, theology was at stake. The body of believers desired clarity on the topic of icons in order to remain united in the truth. Fortunately, a certain figure rose to the task. "The controversy over the veneration of images prompted a monk living in the Holy Land, John of Damascus, to defend the veneration of icons in three thoughtful treatises that set forth what was at issue in the controversy over images…"[48]

History remembers John for his synthesis of icon veneration. His treatises, together known as the *Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images*, respond to various iconoclast arguments, excerpting testimony from earlier writings, church traditions, and the Old Testament. John regarded the bitter divide over icons to be a work of the devil, and so labored to resolve the issue by refuting the iconoclastic position. "Some have risen up and said that it was wrong to represent and set forth publicly for adoration the saving wounds of Christ, and the combats of the

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[47] Besançon, *The Forbidden Image*, 124.

[48] Wilkens, *Early Christian Thought*, 242.

saints against the devil. Who with a knowledge of divine things and a spiritual sense does not perceive in this a deception of the devil? He is unwilling… that the glory of God and of His saints should be published."[49] John builds a coherent case in defense of the icon, addressing the potential problems surrounding the portrayal of Christ.

Once again, these problems can be sufficiently summarized with the dual questions of whether Christ *should* be portrayed, and whether He *could* be portrayed. John does address the claims of idolatry, whether Christ should be portrayed, by comprehensively citing the Old Testament, claiming that the iconoclasts incorrectly interpreted the condemnation of idols. John distinguishes between veneration, and worship, and explains the type of worship attracted by idols, and the type of worship worthy of God. "John…read the Scriptures carefully and discerned a distinctive feature of biblical religion, namely, that things *can* become the vehicle of God's presence among us."[50][emphasis added] John responds to the problem of idolatry in this manner, by extensively citing examples in the Old Testament where God utilizes matter as a mechanism to interact with man. He writes, "I say matter is God's creation and a good thing… Listen to the words of Scripture concerning matter, which you despise…"[51] He quotes Exodus 35:4-10, regarding material offerings to the Lord, among many other passages.

The second question, of whether Christ *could* be portrayed, relates to the thesis that the incarnation makes images of Christ necessarily possible. John fundamentally opposes the iconoclastic view of an indescribable Christ, and responds to this in several ways. Firstly, he contradicts the idea that the likeness must be identical to the original divine model, and

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[49] St. John of Damascus, *Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images*, 40-41.

[50] Wilkens, *Early Christian Thought*, 248.

[51] St. John, *Holy Images*, 48.

differentiates between the two when considering Christ and the Father. “Now, as we are talking of images and worship, let us analyze the exact meaning of each. An image is a likeness of the original with a certain difference, for it is not an exact reproduction of the original. Thus, the Son is the living, substantial, unchangeable Image of the invisible God (Col. 1.15)... ”[52] The Son is the Image of God, and through Him God may be known.

John also distinguishes between the image of God in the Old Testament and Christ’s form. “I gaze upon the image of God, as Jacob did, (Gen. 32.30) though in a different way. Jacob sounded the note of the future, seeing with immaterial sight, whilst the image of Him who is visible to flesh is burnt into my soul.”[53] Jacob saw God spiritually, as the God of the Old Testament remained invisible. For those after the time of Christ, God was now visible, incarnate in human flesh.

Further addressing the issue of the invisible God, John writes, “I venture to draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes through flesh and blood. I do not draw an image of the immortal Godhead. I paint the visible flesh of God, for it is impossible to represent a spirit (ψυχη), how much more God who gives breath to the spirit.”[54] He makes it clear that he does not endorse the making of images of the invisible God, but only images of Christ. “For in making the image of God, who became incarnate and visible on earth, a man amongst men through His unspeakable goodness, taking upon Him shape and form and flesh, we are not misled.”[55] Recognizing the distinction between the invisible God

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[52] Ibid, 10-11.

[53] Ibid, 20.

[54] St. John, *Holy Images*, 8.

[55] Ibid, 41.

and the visible flesh of Christ, John clarifies that he understands the difference between the image or the 'matter' and God Himself. "Now, however, when God is seen clothed in flesh, and conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honoring that matter which works my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God."[56] John's defense of icons came from an innocent intention to worship God, always. With icons, John discovers God in the image of Him. "It is the image painted on the wood, the person depicted by the icon, that makes it precious."[57]

John also makes absolutely clear the possibility of portraying the likeness of Jesus, on account of His being flesh and incarnate. "When the Invisible One becomes visible to flesh, you may then draw a likeness of His form. When He who is a pure spirit, without form or limit, immeasurable in the boundlessness of His own nature, existing as God, takes upon Himself the form of a servant in substance and in stature, and a body of flesh, then you may draw His likeness, and show it to anyone willing to contemplate it."[58] John's profound reaction to observing Christ's portrait reveals his important personal connection to the subject. This relates to John's use of the Greek term *latreia*, referring to an adoration directed to the Trinity alone. John's precious tradition of revering Christ through His image, and his discernment between types of worship and veneration, pivotally influenced the church's position on icon doctrine.

John thought it theologically crucial to have the ability to create a likeness of Christ. This argument completes the final piece of the thesis of this paper, that the incarnation of Christ

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[56] Ibid, 14.

[57] Wilkens, *Early Christian Thought*, 259.

[58] St. John, *Holy Images*, 10.

makes it *necessary* for divine portraits to be possible. On account of Christ's visibility, determined essential by Athanasius, it is possible to depict Christ. John takes the final step, and establishes the absolute *necessity* that Christ be able to be portrayed. This concept rests at the core of John's argument. He summarizes:

> So with regard to images we must manifest the truth, and take into account the intention of those who make them. If it be in very deed for the glory of God and of His saints to promote goodness, to avoid evil, and save souls, we should receive and honor and worship them as images, and remembrances, likenesses, and the books of the illiterate. We should love and embrace them with hand and heart as reminders of the incarnate God… and the glory of Christ…[59]

By the key notion of necessity, John reveals the true implications of the Iconoclastic Controversy. The Iconoclasts claimed the inaccessibility of *Christ*, which prevented icons of Him. "In John's view the prohibition of icons challenged the fundamental Christian belief in the Incarnation… If Christ could not be painted as a human being… how could one claim that God had become incarnate?"[60] If Christ was Incarnate, it is necessary that it be possible for him to be portrayed. If these depictions are not possible, the Incarnation inevitably falls under doubt.

Conclusion

At the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, nearly forty years after John's death, the "church's teaching on icons was given its definitive form."[61] The Council decreed that various mediums should embody the images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the angels, and the saints, for the public to revere, even going so far to declare anathema upon those who reject the decision. "If

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[59] St. John, *Holy Images*, 45.

[60] Wilkens, *Early Christian Thought*, 244.

[61] Wilkens, *Early Christian Thought*, 246.

anyone does not *confess* that Christ our God can be represented in his humanity, let him be anathema. If anyone does not *accept* representation in art of evangelical scenes, let him be anathema… The more frequently [holy images] are seen in representational art, the more are those who see them drawn to remember and long for those who serve as models, and to pay these images the tribute of salutation and respectful veneration."[62] This language traces directly back to St. John, with his distinction between *latreia* and other forms of veneration.

Further, John's argument regarding the Incarnation was also essential, as the Council's resolution established the idea that "in looking at an icon of Christ…one does not simply see the man Christ but "the *Logos* become flesh.""[63] Despite the span of time between the writing of his defense of icons and the determination of the doctrine regarding them, John still exhibited a substantial influence on the Council. Other scholars followed him, and contributed significantly to the theology of this subject in subsequent generations. The most prominent among these, Theodore of Studium, wrote works worthy to coincide as companions of John's own. However, John's arguments regarding the Incarnation are pertinent to the scope of this paper. The intimate relation between the image and the flesh is exemplified by the connection between the divine portrait and the Incarnate Christ.

And so occurred the first victory of the icon during the period of the Iconoclastic controversies. However, iconoclasm reemerged in the late 800s, establishing a pattern of controversy that would carry on over the centuries. The theology surrounding the divine portrait possesses a long and complex history. In only the first six centuries of the existence of Christian

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[62] From the Second Council of Nicaea, taken from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner.

[63] Wilkens, *Early Christian Thought*, 246.

art, several passionate controversies and upheavals centered around the portrait of Christ. While the icon achieved a long-awaited victory at the Second Council, a second controversy followed merely a century later. Following the Iconoclastic Controversies, these conflicts surrounding the portrait of Christ continued into the Middle Ages, later seen in the Calvinist opposition to the icon. Uncertainty even lingers in the modern age.

Nevertheless, the icon endures in the Byzantine church, and the divine portrait of Christ remains one of the most powerful and beautiful genres of Christian art. The traditions of art in the Eastern church boast a unique majesty. Intricate icons glow within golden cathedrals, captivating and splendid with rich color. The experience invites deep contemplation of the ancient faces depicted. Among these, the portrait of Christ always dominates, with a distinct cruciform halo, bearing features that became familiar due to the consistent Byzantine image maintained over the centuries.

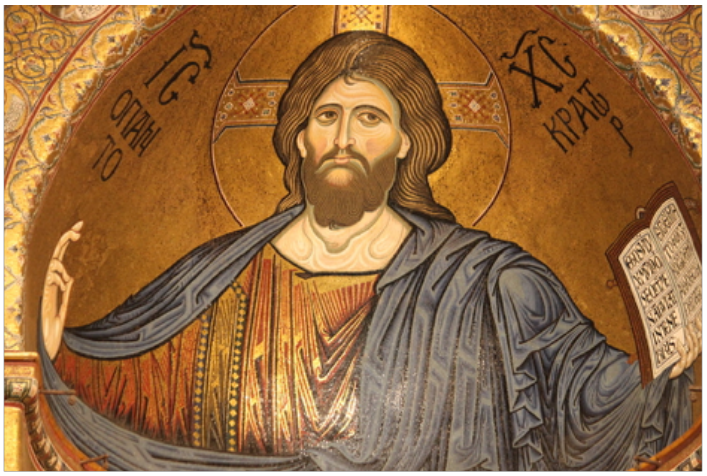

Fig. 4. Mosaic Christ Pantocrator, dominating from the conch of the Cathedral of Monreale, Sicily, late 12th century. (Photo: Peter Hess)

The contemplation of the divine icon, which John of Damascus found so important, survives today and continues to make the portrait precious. Interacting with Christ's image interacts with His form itself. The image of the Incarnate Savior prompts a deep yearning for the Lord in the viewer. John writes, "We long to see what He was like."[64] This confession is simple and sincere. Christians long to see their Lord, hoping for that final, joyous day in which they will

[64] St. John, *Holy Images*, 41.

come face to face with Him. The controversies prompted by divine portraits of Christ were legitimate to a point, but ultimately, it is necessary for such portraits to be possible. With the foundation of a necessary divine portrait by the incarnation, Christians may now contemplate the image of Christ. “When we look at an icon of Christ, we come face to face with the living person, and by showing reverence to the icon we venerate Christ Himself.”[65] As intended by the decree of the Second Council, the icon bonds the viewer with the person displayed in a way most intimate, identifying the beholder with the icon. The holy visage of Jesus Christ remains alive today through iconography—the most powerful divine portrait.

“The Lord make His face shine on you,

and be gracious to you;

The Lord turn His face toward you,

and give you peace.”

— Numbers 6:25-26[66]

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[65] Wilkens, *Early Christian Thought*, 254.

[66] Numbers 6:25-26 (New International Version).

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