



On the Divine Images

John of Damascus

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

On the Divine Images

John of Damascus

On the Divine Images John of Damascus

St John of Damascus wrote the treatises Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images in response to the iconoclastic heresy of the eighth century.

On the Divine Images Details

Date : Published March 1st 1980 by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press

ISBN : 9780913836620

Author : John of Damascus

Format : Paperback 107 pages

Genre : Religion, Theology, Christianity, Nonfiction, History, Christian, Classics, Art, Philosophy, Catholic

 [Download On the Divine Images ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online On the Divine Images ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online On the Divine Images John of Damascus

From Reader Review On the Divine Images for online ebook

Ephraim Lawson Bowick says

Read it. And try to in one day if you can. St. John of Damascus affirms within this text "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" through the defense and veneration of holy images. However, I'm sure the aforementioned topic is blatantly implied from the title of the book. ;) Of the three discourses within this tome, Apology III was my personal favourite. St. John of Damascus pray to God for us!

Daniel says

In defense of matter.

David Withun says

St. John's text is the original, classic defense of the Holy Icons against their detractors. Given the popularity of the iconoclastic position among certain Christian groups today, his work remains as relevant as ever in its pertinence to the topics St. John directly writes upon. In the modern world, though, St. John's discussion has a much wider relevance than he perhaps originally intended. For instance, his treatments of the importance of a sacramental understanding of the world, of the omnipresence of God even within the created world, and of the place of matter as a conduit of grace are of great relevance to a world concerned with developing a sound philosophical basis for ecological action. I recommend this book to anyone interested in understanding the traditional Christian worldview and its continuing relevance in the modern world.

Brian Glass says

Essential reading for an understanding of icons.

sam tannehill says

To understand the controversy of images amongst 9th century Christians, read this book about the images by a 9th century Christian.

Nicholas says

During the Iconoclast period, St. John of Damascus wrote these powerful apologies condemning those who claim that Christians worship images. In addition, he touches on the Theology and Spirituality of iconography as well as explains the differences between veneration and worship.

Dustin says

St. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, translated by Andrew Louth (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003). Pp. 163. Paperback \$17.00.

If anyone is interested in Orthodox iconography, or the tradition of Christian painting, this book is a must read. Because this book is well translated and very accessible, I highly recommend simply reading this book – a primary source – rather than reading a secondary source where an author describes St. John of Damascus's theology of iconography. What makes this book an especially “must read” for those interested in iconography is the influence St. John had on the theology of Christian images. This book provides the foundation for all subsequent theology. In addition, St. John not only articulates the theology of images, but he articulates how iconography is central to all of Christian theology. His treatment is all-inclusive, and it goes much further than simply arguing that now that God has been seen in the person of Jesus Christ we can depict his image. Because iconography is so central to Christian theology and salvation, this book is a must read.

I won't write out his full theology here, but I will give a brief introduction. He starts by taking a look at the Old Testament prohibition against idols. St. John views this prohibition from two perspectives: 1) the nature of the commandment, and 2) the definition of veneration. He says that the nature of the commandment was to prevent the Israelites from falling into idolatry. He also argues that the commandment is more specifically against depicting the nature/essence/substance of God, and to prevent humanity from worshiping creation instead of the Creator. Iconography, St. John points out, does neither of these: it's not a depiction of God's essence, nor does it lead one to worship creation. The second aspect, veneration, boils down to an articulation of definition. St. John argues that veneration has two meanings: one is worship, and the other is to pay honor to someone. While worship is due to God alone, honoring the person depicted in an icon is not worship, but it is paying honor, which ultimately glorifies God.

It is, at this point, that St. John is able to fully turn his attention to iconography. What changes the entire game is the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, that is God enfleshed, or Incarnate. St. John writes, “Therefore I am emboldened to depict the invisible God, not as invisible, but as he became visible for our sake, by participating in the flesh and blood. I do not depict the invisible divinity, but I depict God made visible in the flesh” (I.4).

Even the Incarnation has several levels of understanding. In the first aspect of the argument, St. John argues that what was invisible is now visible. Here he does a lengthy analysis of the definitions of “image.” He states that it is important to note that images make manifest what was hidden or unseen. In this way, an image holds two realities together: the seen/visible and unseen/invisible. With this in mind, St. John is able to say that icons of Christ both depict the Son of God as he was in the 1st century, as well as indicate his invisible presence among us now.

At this point, that St. John delves deeper into Incarnational theology. He reminds us that after God created the visible (earth, animals, seas, etc.) and invisible (heaven, angels, etc.) worlds, God created humanity to unite the two worlds (i.e., we were created in His image to attain His likeness). Our task, in sum, was to make creation a sacrament. However, we failed in this task; but Christ, through his Incarnation, was able to succeed where we failed. This union means that humanity is now infused with divinity. Matter is recreated, and it is now glorified with God's presence. It is for this reason that we can venerate the icons.

St. John writes, “I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake,

and in matter made his abode, and through matter worked my salvation. 'For the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' It is clear to all that flesh is matter and is a creature. I reverence therefore matter and I hold in respect and venerate that through which my salvation has come about, I reverence it not as God, but as filled with divine energy and grace" (II.14). In this way, the use of icons in worship is a sacramental act.

It is also because of the Incarnation that we can glorify God through the saints; after all they able to participate in the life of God because of the divine/human union in Christ. So when we venerate the image of the saints, we are, in actuality, glorifying God. St. John takes it further by writing, "The temple that Solomon built was dedicated with the blood of animals [Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement] and adorned with images of animals, of lions and bulls and phoenixes and pomegranates. Now the Church is dedicated by the blood of Christ and his saints and adorned with an image of Christ and his saints" (II.15).

There's much more in this these amazing three treatises; however, it's really about the Incarnation, the Son of God taking on flesh, and the transfiguration of matter that takes place as a result, which allows for our deification. It's also about the meaning of image and veneration, the dignity of matter, and the importance of the unwritten tradition handed down by the Church through the apostles and now articulated by St. John.

Rachel Noffke says

A bit repetitive, but overall a pretty good defense of the practice of icon veneration within the Church.

Steve says

Well what do you say about this? The defence of the use of images makes a good and true point with regard to how things are before v after the incarnation. However the argument fails as the express command to make such images is the howling gap in the argument. Everything is derived by inference, but the arguments never stack high enough.

The 3 sermons on Mary just make matters worse. Supposition + inference = an unconvincing argument.

Having said that the first sections on images are enjoyable to read.

Kenneth says

The classic patristic defense of the veneration of icons over against the 8th century iconoclasts.

Andrew says

Among the interesting things I learned from this book is that the logo for Jaegermeister surely must come from the legend of St.Eustathius, aka St. Placida. John of Damascus (who died around 750) wrote these treatises in the course of the Iconoclast Controversy, which lasted from the early 8th to the mid-9th century.

It's remarkable to me that the Christians could fight for more than a century over what seems, from my perspective, such an elementary distinction between the object interpreted and the object the interpretation intends. But I suppose people are good at arguing over all sorts of seemingly unobjectionable things. The fact that the interpretive acts took the form of veneration that certainly looked worshipful (although it was not, strictly speaking, worship, John tirelessly maintains) presumably helps account for the persistence and ferocity of the controversy.

Christopher says

ON THE DIVINE IMAGES is a series of apologies written by St John of Damascus in the 8th century against the iconoclasm begun by Byzantine emperor Leo III. The writer was safe from persecution in the monastery of St Sabbas in Palestine, outside of the Byzantine empire, and the destruction of images by his fellow Christians in Byzantium, who had long resisted the image-hating Muslim hordes, must have seemed like the greatest madness to him.

At the heart of St John of Damascus' argument is that the Son of God become matter and therefore can be depicted; to resist depictions of Jesus Christ is to reject that Christ was fully man, a heresy the Church had already confronted and defeated at earlier ecumenical councils. Images of Christ are necessary to safeguard this truth about His nature, St John says. "I do not worship matter, but I worship the creator of matter who became matter for my sake..." He also shows how the use of material objects and even images in worship enjoys sanction in the Old Testament, for the Ark of the Covenant was adorned with cherubim and Aaron's staff and the tablets were placed within, and God commanded Moses to make an image of a serpent to heal all who were bitten by snakes.

The work consists of three apologies. The first is the most passionate, but the latter two are more logically structured. It is in the third apology that St John of Damascus makes the well-known distinction between absolute worship, given to the Trinity alone, and "relative worship", or veneration, given to material objects which remind us of God, to the saints who have gone before, and to our fellow Christians. After each apology follows a list of citations from the Church Fathers supporting the use of images, indicating that images have been around since the first days of the Church and were not an innovation of the era of St John of Damascus.

I found some parts of St John of Damascus' apology to be wanting. For example, he does not give a strong argument as to how veneration of an image passes to its prototype. The attestation of the Church that it is so is enough to convince Orthodox Christians, but it would still be nice to see a chain of reasoning. Maybe I have gotten too used to modern philosophical writers like Richard Swinburne, but I like theological arguments to be very rigorous.

The translation of this work is based originally on that of Mary H. Allies published in 1898. David Anderson revised and amplified it, correcting errors and eliminating archaic language. Footnotes are given to indicate Scriptural references. Anderson has chosen to cut out the citations after the third apology which had already appeared in earlier portions. The translation is quite readable, though I suppose that most of the target audience of this edition is already trained enough to read the original Greek.

Matt says

A classic treatise on the proper veneration of holy images by Christians. St. John lays out what have become

the usual arguments, but also some points I hadn't really heard much about before: that, even in the Scriptures, we see different degrees of worship afforded to different people and things, such as Jacob bowing down before (worshiping) Pharaoh. The arguments that rely on tradition (and, this, the numerous patristic citations) will likely be unconvincing to Protestants, but the arguments from Scripture should be sufficient. "I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honoring the matter which wrought my salvation! I honor it, but not as God."

Matthew says

This is a very interesting topic to me. I guess that despite the strong stance against images and icons born out of the Reformation, I have some sympathy for the Orthodox folks. Much of the book was about images of the saints which I feel there is less controversy over (though we keep them out of the sanctuary). The discussion on images of Christ is complicated I think. Christ is the image of the Father. We all are to a different degree image bearers, and it seems that prohibiting pictures of his humanity (i.e. his physical form) is more reactionary than thoughtful. If we were monophysites I would think differently. The point is made that we do not worship paint or wood or canvas and a picture by nature directs our minds to the subject of the image. I think this accounts for some of the difference in majesty and reverence experienced by the Orthodox compared to our typical Protestant churches.

The book was a bit repetitive and there was avocation of prayer offered to Mary and the Saints which I find to be bad theology.

Wawan says

This book presents St. John of Damascus's defense against the 8th century Iconoclasts whose view became the official stance of the (Eastern) Roman Empire with regards to icons. This book consists of three treatises (as the title states :D) written at three different times but show strong consistency, albeit its too many repetitions. For readers who are not familiar with the Catholic doctrines and find the significance of rituals and traditions, including sainthood and icons, in Catholicism difficult to grasp, this book is a good window to gain understanding of such views. For non-Christian monotheists, this book also provides a good introduction to the idea of trinity, its origins and as well as its implications; John the Damascene also presents his argument as to how trinity is different from idolatry and how the production and veneration of icons in Catholicism are not idolatrous.
