

## Art, Incarnation and Iconology

Written by Calvin Fox

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Out of the Iconoclastic Controversy (ibid) came an interesting philosophical and theological aesthetic or Philosophy of Art. Basic to that aesthetic is the Doctrine of the Incarnation. This is key to my understanding of the subject. Each side in the controversy appealed to this Doctrine which both believed. The Nicene Creed declared that Jesus the Son was of one being with the Father. He was true God of true God. The Athanasian Creed and the Council of Chalcedon, both mid 5th Century, affirmed that Jesus is fully Man and simultaneously He is fully God. Any true icon of Jesus, therefore, would have to capture this Divine-Human nature and that is impossible. Therefore, the iconoclasts argue, all icons were false and should be smashed. If it were not impossible but achieved, the icon would be a blasphemous, an Idol clearly forbidden by the 2nd Commandment. To argue the image captured only the historical figure of Jesus would also be blasphemous and heretical because such an image would be an attempt to divide the two natures of Jesus; that too is impossible.

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It may be argued that those who opposed the man-made images of Jesus (the iconoclasts) were influenced by a sort of Docetism. The latter is a heresy which views matter as evil and insists that God could not be associated with it. Jesus only appeared to have a physical body (Grk, dokeo- to seem). Christians who are orthodox, of course accept what both the Bible and the Church Councils teach- Jesus was God incarnate (in the flesh- see 1 John 4:2-3). But there have always been Christians who have a problem vis-à-vis the body (the physical) as such and believe that the spirit is far more important and holy or untainted by the physical. Phil 3:3 and especially v.21 in the KJV seems to say our physical bodies are "vile". This attitude is revealed in statements such as "what Jesus looked like is unimportant". "He has been resurrected and is spirit now [!] and we know and worship him in our spirit" (citing, e.g., John 4:23, 6:63, etc) This bias extends to Art (and all kinds of physical activity, especially from sex) and is a major argument against any kind of adornment or decoration in church buildings. The latter are for spiritual worship and thus we find the very plain meeting house and furnishings from day's past and today's popular multipurpose buildings that look like anything but a traditional church or religious or sacred place (although they will be decorated and made to look attractive and comfortable- just not religious!) This is even part of the argument against an organized, institutional Church as such. The true Church, Body of Christ, we hear, is primarily spiritual and invisible. It can not be defined by Denomination or limited to any physical body (a building).

The major argument by those who approve and use icons is also based on the Incarnation. Just as the early Christians with a Jewish Heritage willingly and suddenly changed their understanding of the Law about the Sabbath observance on the 7th Day to the 1st Day because of the Resurrection of Christ, so they willingly changed their understanding of the 2nd Commandment because of the Incarnation of Christ. That event radically changed their ideas about Art! The Word became flesh. The Word became an Icon. The Incarnation is the validation, the inspiration and the Model of Art as it is meant to be.

We can say can that everything God created in the natural world is an icon (a work of Art). Before anything material existed it was first in the mind of God. He thought it, contemplated it, planned it in his thoughts. Everything in creation is made (created) and it is made according to God's thoughts or designs for it. (*Heb 11:3 the visible has its origin in the invisible.*) Thus every single thing in creation is an icon. It is an image or reflection or copy of something non-material

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that was in God's mind in Eternity. This is exactly what the incarnate Son of God was and is. God created all objective or material things and they are all icons. We are surrounded by icons. We ourselves are icons. Do we really want to denounce and smash all icons? We do not want to be iconoclasts!

Human beings are made in the likeness of God. We all image Him. Various attributes of God (known as the communicable attributes) which have always existed in Eternity became present on earth in the form of human beings (and in no other creature or living thing). When we consider Man, as Psalm 8 does, what is he? He is a likeness of God, an icon. When we look at human beings we see attributes God, That is why the study of Man can lead to the knowledge of some aspects of God and vice versa, but of course, humans beings are not God. Occasionally some have thought so and have worshiped Man or themselves. Such people have been wrong and are guilty of idolatry. Icons in themselves are not idols or gods to be worshipped. Idolatry is the most serious evil in the Bible. We must beware of idols and flee from them (1 John 5:20-21). We must denounce the worship of Art, but not all Art itself.

It is to be expected that Human beings are inveterate image makers as their Creator is. It is an essential way in which we ourselves image or reflect our Creator. Art is image (icon) making: on film and canvas, with words or fabrics or stone. God is an Artist, how could we not be? To denigrate or repress Art would be to denigrate or repress who we are and who made us.

*Rom 1:20 God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made,*

Icons as such, all created things that image or copy other things, have a valuable, useful, God-given function. They are revelatory. The heavens and earth reveal truths about God. Human beings reveal more truths about God. Jesus Christ reveals God. *Col 1:15 He is the image [eikon] of the invisible God.*

The Scripture reveals truth about God. Literally, the words and content of the Bible are iconic. Miracles are defined by John as "signs", they signify something beyond and other than themselves. The Tabernacle and Temple are filled with man-made Art that is symbolic of spiritual truth. The apocalyptic and metaphoric language in the Bible is full of imagery. The Sacraments are iconic, too. In themselves all icons are signs of another reality. They point beyond themselves to that reality. They make visible what is otherwise invisible. That is what the Incarnation did.

*John 1:18 No-one has ever seen God, but [Jesus] has made him known.*

That is the God-given function of Icons and all Art. Of course, artists are sinners. Not all art fulfills its God-given function. This understanding of Art as icon is very helpful in defining what good Art is. The degree Art is good is the degree it images the design or intent in the mind of the artist, i.e.- How faithful it is to what the artist had, literally, in mind. It is good or true Art if it accurately corresponds to the intent of the artist. But this alone is not sufficient to make "good" Art. The sinful human artist's mind may be filled with darkness and his work will reflect that, not Light or Truth.

For Art to fulfill its God-given function, the artist's thoughts and intent should correspond or be

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faithful to the design or intent of the Original Artist, i.e.- God. If the works of our hands do not reflect God (His Holiness, His Presence in the world and His Grace, Character and Righteousness) or if they portray the opposite or contradict Biblical Truth about Creation, the Fall, Redemption and both the Human predicament and potential, then they are not acceptable. Art that is faithful to a Christian World View is true and good. That Art, such Icons, should be valued and cultivated to the Glory of God