

Is *Black Lives Matter* Iconoclastic?

by Matthew Cooper

One of the common charges against the participants in the protests which began in Minneapolis¹ and spread virally around the country, and which frequently included the defacing and toppling of public statuary, is that the protesters are engaged in a new wave of *iconoclasm*². Coming from political and cultural conservatives, these arguments claim that the protests are imbued with a new and dangerous religious impulse³. Now for Orthodox Christians, who follow the canons of the Seventh Ecumenical Council and venerate the great Orthodox iconophile Saint John of Damascus, this charge of iconoclasm is grave, and should be investigated in earnest.

First it is necessary to understand what precisely is meant by iconoclasm. In our contemporary context we have an understanding of the word which refers to any sort of action which attacks public images of human beings. And in popular discourse iconoclasm can even be taken to mean, approvingly, an act or stance against the received wisdom in any particular field of inquiry.

But in its original context the term had a specific and technical meaning. The original Byzantine iconoclasts against whom Saint John of Damascus wrote, led by Leon III ‘the Isaurian’⁴ (and by several of his successors in office), were motivated primarily by objections to the portrayal in wood and paint of Jesus Christ, of the Theotokos and of the Saints, holding that because these artifacts are inanimate objects they are unworthy even of symbolic or conditional veneration⁵. Iconoclasm was therefore, in its essence, an attempt to purify the faith of its gross materialities and its Pagan superstitions: the ideal for the iconoclast was the Origenist veneration of the immaterial, formless, boundless and reality-encompassing God of classical theism in inward contemplation: simple, direct and unmediated by any kind of distracting images or symbols.

Naturally there was a political consideration to this ideation – the confidently-advancing armies of the Islamic Caliphate spurred a reckoning among the Byzantine elite and a fear that they might be doing something right that the Christians were doing wrong. There was a class element to it as well. Iconoclasm was the ideology of the literate, including those who read Origen and other classically-influenced philosophers. As such the iconoclast movement moved to exclude common and working-class people, craftsmen in particular – those dirty people working with their hands shaping the demiurge’s filthy matter to make crude *simulacra* of higher spiritual realities. Iconoclasm in this way did mark an unfortunate reversion to some of the less-attractive prejudices of the classical Greco-Roman philosophical world, in which slaves and craftsmen were disdained as belonging to a lower order of being. There was also a misogynist element to iconoclasm as well: women were deemed too silly and bound to worldly matters to be worthy of the sort of pure unworldly contemplation that Leon III and his followers strove after. We see these in a negative sense, in some of Saint John’s apologetics for icons. He moves to defend the spirituality of women, for example – in particular the Mother of God – as well as the honor of craftsmen and even the unlettered: ‘What the book is to the literate, the image is to the illiterate’, is a direct quote from Saint John. And indeed, he is one of the earliest and fiercest critics within Christianity of Islamic theology, even though he lived within and on good terms with the Islamic Caliphate⁶.

When answering the iconoclasts, Saint John of Damascus therefore moves specifically to defend the creation of images of Christ, of the Theotokos and of the saints in turn. Much of the heavy lifting of his argument is done through the distinction he draws between *λατρεία* (*latreia*; that is to say, ‘worship’) and *προσκύνησις* (*proskynēsis*; that is to say, ‘veneration’)⁷. There is an absolute, all-demanding worship (*λατρεία*) which is due by men to the Godhead alone, in the Holy Trinity, which no other person or idea or thing may be allowed to replace. On the other hand, there are more ordinary forms of prostration (*προσκύνησις*) which may be lawfully given to people or even objects ‘of great excellence’⁸. Even in the Old Testament these ordinary forms of prostration or veneration were not considered unlawful, and Saint John uses examples thence to support this:

Abraham bowed down to the sons of Hamor, men who had neither faith nor knowledge of God, when he bought the double cave intended to become a tomb. Jacob bowed to the ground before Esau, his brother, and also before

the tip of his son Joseph's staff. He bowed down, but he did not adore. Joshua, the son of Nun, and Daniel bowed in veneration before an angel of God, but they did not adore him. For adoration is one thing, and that which is offered in order to honor something of great excellence is another.⁹

In answer to the iconoclasts' disdain for matter, Saint John articulates a fuller understanding of the Platonic chain of being, in which matter participates in the work of salvation.

In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. 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 brought about my salvation! Do not despise matter, for it is not despicable. God has made nothing despicable.¹⁰

It is clear that the Damascene in defending the images of the Church restricts his apologetic to the images of Christ, the Theotokos, the angelic powers which sensibly appeared to men, the righteous of the Old Testament, and the saints who through *theōsis* participated in the divine energies and therefore could lawfully be portrayed in sacred images. Importantly, Saint John is not in the business of defending either the reputations or the images of the rulers of his own time, for which he often reserves fairly harsh invective. For example, in his first *Apology* for icons Saint John laments: 'Few men can be found who know enough to despise the evil laws of kings¹¹,' though the king he meant in this instance was of course Leon III!

But what of the defacement of statues? What of the desecration of public monuments? What of the property destruction? In his third *Apology* Saint John limns a hierarchy of five kinds of *latreia*, followed by seven kinds of *proskynēsis*. Saint John writes that of the forms of *latreia*, the adoration of God is the highest, followed by awe of God, then thanksgiving to God, then beseeching God's help, then repentance and confession to God. Below all of these forms of *latreia* Saint John ranks the various forms of *proskynēsis*. We are first of all to honor the Theotokos in whom God took human form and the saints whom Christ called to Him; second, the Holy Places where Christ lived and walked; third, the Gospel and the holy altars and vessels containing the Eucharist; fourth, the images seen by the Prophets which anticipate Christ; fifth, each other as human beings; sixth, those in authority to rule over us; and last, those

who benefit us materially in some way¹². In the narrow sense, then, the destruction even of public images of secular authority or meaning should *not* be considered iconoclasm. As discussed above, iconoclasm in this narrow sense consists of attacks on objects in the first three orders of *proskynēsis* in Saint John's hierarchy: the images of Christ and the Theotokos and the saints. On the other hand, some of the recent attacks on public statuary, such as on Junipero Serra¹³ in California – who is a Roman Catholic saint – do and should count as instances of iconoclasm.

This is not to say that Saint John would approve of individual acts defacing or toppling statues and objects of popular public veneration: 'Do not remove age-old boundaries, erected by your fathers,' writes Saint John¹⁴. These things, after all, belong to his *sixth* order of *proskynēsis*, since they represent the authority of the state and those who are given the power and civic right of rule over us. But if we take his schematic seriously, we would have to acknowledge that he would see excessive police force against *anyone*, especially vulnerable non-white folks, as a more egregious and more blameworthy form of iconoclastic sacrilege. It is a failure to perform the fifth order of *proskynēsis*, the duties and dignity we owe to each other as human beings.

This ordered understanding of iconoclasm gives us another insight into what Saint John of Damascus's priorities may have been. His concern, after all, was that an imperial power, in the person of Leon III, was directing an attack on the images of Christ which were worthy of veneration. In Saint John's understanding, there was an indelible link between the pride of the emperor – whose symbols, again, he marshals in favor of *proskynēsis* toward religious icons – and his hubristic destruction of the image of God in the Empire which he ruled. Leon III did not just tear down boards and paint over plaster. The fact that he employed the armed forces of the Empire in doing so is also significant. He arrested and tortured monks who defended the use of images. He had ambitions for expanding the territory of the Empire and adding to his own personal prestige. When Saint John of Damascus inveighs against '*the evil laws of kings*', we must understand by this that he considers iconoclasm to be an outgrowth of a deeper passion: that of imperial *hubris*¹⁵.

And this points us to an apparent difference between the iconoclasm of ancient Byzantium and of that of today: Whereas the original instances of iconoclasm were directed by the elite class and aimed from the top down, the modern-day 'iconoclasm' appears to originate in a very real grassroots anger at the

treatment of black people at the hands of law enforcement. Top-down versus bottom-up. But perhaps this is to get matters precisely backwards. For the very slogan, '*Black Lives Matter*', is in fact an expression of the iconodule faith. *God has made nothing despicable*. More to the point, *God has made no human being despicable*, and each human being and each human life is itself an image, an icon, of the Uncreated, worthy of veneration. Black human beings are equally icons of God. In its literal sense, this is exactly what the slogan '*Black Lives Matter*' means. So when protesters kneel in memory of George Floyd and ask that justice be done for him and his family, they are doing nothing but the sort of ordinary *proskynēsis* that Orthodox Christians perform in the normal course of life in the Church even for living and dead persons who are not saints. George Floyd is not a saint, but that does not and should not preclude us from mourning him in a natural and human way. As Archbishop Atallah (Hanna) of Sebaste recently put it:

From the City of Jerusalem – from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher – We send our sincere condolences to the family of George Floyd. Rest in Peace George Floyd. You sacrificed your life for us to rise and fight against racism and oppression.¹⁶

And when protesters call agents of the state to task for their hubristic blindness to the moral equality of black Americans with their white neighbors Orthodox Christians may also hear the moral witness of Saint John of Damascus against Leon III and his epigones and remember too the saint's subtle ranking of the duties we Orthodox owe to the state and to one another.

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Notes

1. Cooper, Matthew. 'Minneapolis on fire', *The Heavy Anglo Orthodox*, 29 May 2020. Accessible online at: <https://heavylangloorthodox.blogspot.com/2020/05/minneapolis-on-fire.html>.
2. Hilditch, Cameron. 'The new iconoclasts', *National Review*, 9 June 2020. Accessible online at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200617230834/https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/06/the-new-iconoclasts/>.

3. Leithart, Peter. 'America's new religion', *Theopolis Institute*, 8 June 2020. Accessible online at: https://theopolisinstitute.com/leithart_post/americas-new-religion/.
4. Neil, Bronwen. 'Leo III', *De imperatoribus Romanis*. Available online at: <https://www.roman-emperors.org/leoiii.htm>.
5. Džalto, Davor. 'Iconoclastic controversies', *Khan Academy*. Accessible online at: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/medieval-world/byzantine1/beginners-guide-byzantine/a/iconoclastic-controversies>.
6. John of Damascus, trans. Frederick Chase. 'The fountain of knowledge', in *The Fathers of the Church* vol. XXXVII. Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Publishing, 2012.
7. John of Damascus, trans. David Anderson. *On the Divine Images*, 2nd edition. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994, pg. 9.
8. *Ibid.*, pg. 19.
9. *Ibid.*, pg. 19.
10. John of Damascus, *Images*, pp. 23-24.
11. John of Damascus, *Images*, pg. 13.
12. John of Damascus, *Images*, pp. 82-88.
13. Fountain, Matt. 'Catholic Church removes Junípero Serra statue from San Luis Obispo Mission', *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 22 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/article243718742.html>.
14. John of Damascus, *Images*, pg. 31.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 13 and pg. 28. In particular, Saint John intimates that iconoclasm proceeds from a sinful wish on the part of the 'earthly emperor' to 'deprive the Lord of His army', of a tyrannical desire and envy for the honour that is awarded to the saints.
16. Archbishop Theodosios (Hannâ). 'Statement in solidarity with the anti-racism movement in America', *American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee*, 10 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.adc.org/his-excellency-archbishop-theososios-atallah-hannas-statement-in-solidarity-with-the-anti-racism-movement-in-america/>.