

On the Aristotelian Heritage of John of Damascus

Joseph Koterski, S.J.

Patristic theologians frequently make use of philosophical insights for their own purposes that might surprise their philosophical sources. Athanasius, for example, though suspicious of the intrusion of such non-biblical terminology as *homoousios* in the otherwise entirely biblical Nicene Creed, found in the grudging employment of a philosophical term a helpful strategy for defending biblical faith about the true divinity of Christ and simultaneously His true humanity. Exegetes of the opposed camps of Antioch and Alexandria had been regularly citing the same scriptural passages to each other but with different emphases and interpretations. What eventually swayed Athanasius was the need for a clarification of phrases originating in the Bible but subject to ambiguity in the theological discussion that ensued. Philosophy could not decide the truth of revelation, but it could expose the nature of some theological disputes and prevent heretical departures from orthodoxy by exposing the real issues hidden beneath semantic cloaks.

Likewise, for the great Cappadocian theologians of the fourth century, it was a set of philosophical distinctions pertaining to *ousia* ("being" or "substance"), *hypostasis* ("individual"), *prosopon* ("person"), and *physis* ("nature") that permitted certain important theological advances in the Trinitarian and Christological controversies. By fixing with philosophical precision the meaning of the crucial terms within the disputes, it became possible, if not to resolve all the problems, at least to clarify the paradoxes latent in orthodox formulations of these mysteries of how the one God is three Persons and how Christ can unite divine and human natures in one person without mingling or confusion.

Yet the unexpected philosophical progress achieved by giving more ontological weight to *prosopon* than this theatrical term for a role on stage normally carried (it was the Greek equivalent of the more familiar Latin term

“dramatis personae” used in listing the characters in a play and has no heritage within Greek metaphysics) might well have surprised philosophers of *ousia* (“being” or “substance”) like Aristotle, who tended to make God into an impersonal force, the unmoved mover. Not only did it open a philosophical route to understanding the revelation of God as intrinsically tri-personal, but also (in a development deeply relevant to our current concern in this essay) a path to progress in anthropology unanticipated by its pagan sources. From their meditations on Romans 1:20 Christian thinkers undertook the work of natural theology from this biblical espousal of the fertile philosophical commonplace that effects resemble their causes. In this way they could hold that everyone should naturally be able to recognize the existence of God.

But this causal principle had also posed a problem for any effort to integrate natural theology and religious anthropology ever since Xenophanes observed that each people seems to make gods in its own image, and that if horses made gods they would be equine, much as there was a Thracian look favored in the gods of Thrace.¹ But if the divine power considered as the first principle of the universe were non-personal, then any religious enthusiasm for parallels between divine and human could reasonably be considered as merely the excesses of anthropomorphic imaginations. The history of Greek philosophy shows a steady tendency to bend to the pressures of this line of reasoning and to treat the divine as impersonal, be it the Idea of the Good and the other Forms in Plato (which stands above the Demiurge of the *Timaeus* and to which he must look in fashioning the world), the utterly impassive Unmoved Mover in Book Lambda of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, the pantheism of the Stoics, or the One of Plotinus.² Admittedly, Christian belief in the personal nature of God was dependent on divine revelation. But if there proved to be a philosophically defensible way to hold the personal nature of God as somehow philosophically coherent with God as first principle, whole new avenues would open up for the theological knowledge of God and for religious anthropology, and especially for the claim made in Genesis that human beings are made in the image of God.³

The question about such use of philosophical insights can profitably be asked of each of the figures of the patristic period. What is the significance of John of

¹ See fragments 15 and 16 of Xenophanes, found in Clement, *Stromateis* V, 109, 3 and VII, 22, 1, quoted in G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 168-69.

² See Lloyd P. Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy: Studies in the Early History of Natural Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

³ See Brooks Otis, “Cappadocian Thought as a Coherent System” in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958), pp. 95-124, and J. F. Callahan, “Greek Philosophy and the Cappadocian Cosmologies” in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958), pp. 31-57.

Damascus's frequent recourse to Aristotelian philosophy? His authentic writings are for the most part theological, either speculative or polemical in character, but they include detailed comment on Aristotelian logic and ontology. The present study concentrates upon just one of his theological works, his trio of orations from 726-730 A.D., *On the Divine Images*,⁴ with occasional reference to his systematic exposition of theology, *The Fount of Knowledge*,⁵ both of which show a distinctive use to which he puts philosophical wisdom.

I: PROPER BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN SERVICE OF TRUE WORSHIP

In *On the Divine Images*, his response to the virulent iconoclasts of his day, John of Damascus does not limit himself to giving reminders about Who is really being honored when believers use material images in their worship, but develops a philosophical account of the use of imagery in worship to support the practice of venerating holy images. It is important to notice two aspects of his strategy: i) a scriptural argument, and in re-enforcement, ii) a philosophical argument.

Throughout the three treatises *On the Divine Image* he summons as evidence case after case from the bible to attest the distinctions he considers crucial for the proper interpretation of the biblical injunctions about image-making. His first line of reasoning is a matter of scriptural hermeneutics: he holds that the command of Moses is a directive to the Chosen People not to make images of God rather than a blanket prohibition against making any images whatsoever. Any claim to make an image of the transcendent God would invariably be faulty and misleading because the infinite is not finite, but any image produced by artistic means, even those trying to suggest infinity, will necessarily be finite. The problem resides not simply in making images by human artistry, for God sometimes commands images to be made, but in making images of God. By the tricks of the devil, those susceptible to idolatry tend to adore them or what they portray as gods instead of the true God. This first consideration then is simply

⁴ Saint Joannes of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, translator unnamed (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980) [hereafter cited as *On the Divine Images*, with internal reference numbers and page numbers of the translation]. For the Greek text, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, herausgegeben von Byzantischen Institut der Abtei Scheyern (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969-1988), series: Patristische Texte und Studien). Volume III: *Contra imaginum calumniatores orationes tres*, besorgt von P. Bonifatius Kotter, O.S.B. (1975) [hereafter cited as "Kotter" with volume and page number].

⁵ *Saint John of Damascus: Writings*, trans. by Frederick H. Chase, Jr. (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), vol. 37 of the "Fathers of the Church Series," pp. 3-110 [Hereafter cited as "FOC" with volume and page number].

an explication of what he considers to be truthful exegesis, but his second line of reasoning is a philosophically informed theological reflection. He maintains that proper biblical interpretation also depends upon comprehending the change in the nature of the human condition that took place with the Incarnation. The very image of God took flesh and appeared with a human nature in the world, thereby providing for us the divine gift of a true image of God and thus opening to us the possibility of making icons of the Incarnate Word as part of true worship.

The motivations of the various parties in the iconoclastic controversy seem to have been more complex than any simple report on their respective stances on icons might suggest.⁶ At very least, loyalties to the diverse traditions of theology that emerged in the history of the Christological controversies would have to be considered, not to mention the raft of political issues present in any struggle that involved the Emperors of Byzantium. John of Damascus may have lived in relative isolation from the daily intrigue of politics at Constantinople, but his treatises, written at the monastery of St. Sabbas in Palestine (then ruled by the Moslem Caliph), were apparently prompted by the edict against the veneration of icons promulgated by Emperor Leo II (717-41). These policies were continued by his son and successor Constantine V (741-75), and the extant records of their campaign manifest the vitriolic hatred they felt for the defense of icons which John of Damascus mounted. Whatever the more involved issues and whatever the shifting interests of day-to-day politics that may also have been in play, let us be concerned here only with the publicly stated arguments in iconoclast and iconodule treatises, considering in turn the two lines of reasoning mentioned above.

Faced with objections to the production of images that were based on the Decalog's prohibition of images,⁷ his lengthy chain of biblical arguments is directly aimed at impaling iconoclasts on the contradiction that the same God whom they allege to have countermanded all image-making also commanded the production and use of a wide variety of images, for example for the adornment of the Temple,⁸ or the curing of those bitten by serpents in the desert through the bronze Serpent Moses was to lift up on a wooden pole.⁹ With a sophistication in the juxtaposition of biblical passages designed to outmaneuver the simplistic, one-track argument of the iconoclasts, who rested their case on the commandment

⁶ See John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Thought* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975), pp. 173-92.

⁷ See *On the Divine Images* at I, 4, 15; Kotter III, p. 75., where John cites Exodus 20:4, with support from Psalm 97:7.

⁸ *On the Divine Images* I, 20, 27-28; Kotter III, pp. 95-96.

⁹ The incident from Numbers 21:9 cited in *On the Divine Images*, 42 (within the section on "Ancient Documents" appended to Treatise I); Kotter III, p. 157.

to make no images, John quotes the following passage from the sermon of Bishop Severianus on the dedication of the Church of Our Savior. Besides the evidence provided directly by its allusions to Scripture, this authority also allows John of Damascus to draw the support of the strong patristic tradition of seeing in the Old Testament prefigurative types¹⁰ of what was to come in the New Testament, such that Moses can speak proleptically of the cross of Christ and John can quote the entire argument in support of the iconophile position:

Moses would answer that this commandment was given to root out material impiety and to keep all the people safe from apostasy and idolatry, but now I cast a bronze serpent for a good purpose—to prefigure the truth. And just as I have erected the tabernacle and everything in it, and the cherubim, which are likenesses of what is invisible to hover over the holy place, as a shadow and a figure of what is to come, so also I have set up a serpent for the salvation of the people, as an endeavor to prepare them for the image of the sign of the cross, and the salvation and redemption which it brings. As a sure confirmation of this, listen to the Lord's own word: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life" (John 3:14).¹¹

The point in Severianus's sermon that John wants to employ is that there is good authority aplenty for the use of material images in the true worship of God. Moses is following the Lord's instruction to cast a bronze serpent for good purposes, John's Gospel praises Moses's typological prefiguration of the Cross, and a revered bishop stands in the same tradition.

John sums up his case for the first relevant principle of biblical interpretation when he points up the inconsistency of holding that the One God would demand contrary things:

Answer me this question: "Is there one God?" You will answer, Yes, I assume there is only one Lawgiver. What? Does He then command contrary things? The cherubim are not outside creation. How can He allow cherubim, carved by the hands of men, to overshadow the mercy-seat? Is it not obvious that since it is

¹⁰ See the classic discussion of this point in Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Exégèse Médiévale: les quatre sens de l'écriture*, 4 volumes (Paris: Aubier, 1959-1964), and the recent study by Paul M. Quay, S.J. *The Mystery Hidden for Ages in God* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), esp. pp. 158-63, 253-54, 337-40, and 343-45.

¹¹ *On the Divine Images*, 45 (Appendix to Treatise 1); Kotter III, p. 160.

impossible to make an image of God, who is uncircumscribed and unable to be represented, or of anything like God, creation is not to be worshipped and adored as God? But He allows the image of cherubim who are circumscribed, to be made and shown as prostrate in adoration before the divine throne, overshadowing the mercy-seat, for it was fitting that the image of the heavenly servants should overshadow the image of the divine mysteries.¹²

God allows, and in fact commands, the making of images of certain creatures but forbids the worship of them as God. Not only is there no contradiction between this stance toward images and the divine commandment not to make images for idolatrous worship; there is actually a complementarity in juxtaposing these divine commands that gives a better appreciation of how God has chosen to encourage human artistry. The contradiction is on the side of iconoclasts, for it is they who misinterpret the scriptures by taking one passage in too narrow a sense and to the exclusion of other relevant material: "How can you make the law a reason for refusing to do what the law itself commands?"¹³ Perhaps the iconoclasts are insensitive to the historic realism of the Incarnation or somehow forgetful of the possibilities that exist for the sanctification of the senses and the utility of images as books for the illiterate:

We use all our senses to produce worthy images of Him [i.e., Christ], and we sanctify the noblest of the senses, which is that of sight. For just as words edify the ear, so also the image stimulates the eye. What the book is to the literate, the image is to the illiterate. Just as words speak to the ear, so the image speaks to the sight; it brings us understanding. For this reason God ordered the ark to be constructed of wood which would not decay, and to be gilded outside and in, and for the tablets to be placed inside, with Aaron's staff and the golden urn containing the manna, in order to provide a remembrance of the past, and an image of the future. Who can say that these were not images, heralds sounding from far off? They were not placed aside in the meeting-tent, but were brought forth in the sight of all the people, who gazed upon them and used them to offer praise and worship to God. Obviously they were not adored for their own sake, but through them the people were led to remember the wonders of old and to worship God, the worker of

¹² *Ibid.*, I, 15, 22; Kotter III, p. 88.

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, 16, 25; Kotter III, p. 92.

wonders. They were images serving as memorials; they were not divine, but led to the remembrance of divine power.¹⁴

In reflections such as this that punctuate John's extensive series of examples of Divine commands to make images by human artistry for use in Israel's worship, John notes a curious inconsistency within the iconoclast position, and also makes a distinction the iconoclast declines to make. The words of the scriptures are themselves a description (*perigraphe*) that represents the allegedly ineffable in human, material terms (to the ear), and thus ought to fall under the same ban as those representations that appeal to the eye, so the iconography of paint and wood are in principle as justified as those using parchment and ink, so long as the image represented is the true form authentically revealed by God. But just as no one thinks that parchment and ink are being adored when we reverence the book of scripture, no one should suppose that these images themselves were being adored, but only that by the very command of God, they lead people to remember and worship God.¹⁵ This directive about real and proper worship (a distinction between *latreia* and *proskunesis*¹⁶), he thinks, is likewise the rule for icons and other images in Christian churches, but for these artifacts he propose a second justification since the making of images of the Lord raises the stakes. At least in the case of icons of Christ, they seem to be a violation of the command against making images of God even as John has interpreted it.

II: ARISTOTELIAN EPISTEMOLOGY IN SERVICE OF TRUE WORSHIP

To this first principle John joins a second that has emerged with the decisive change in the relations of God to the world since the Incarnation: "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."¹⁷ The justification for images of Christ does not arise from human hubris but from divine humility:

If anyone should dare to make an image of the immaterial,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I 17, 25-26; Kotter III, p. 93.

¹⁵ The sophisticated satire against idolatry in the biblical book of *Wisdom*, chapters 13-15, likewise directs our attention beyond the rudimentary and often unsustainable charge that people actually worship clay or wooden statues by pointing to the practical atheism that emerges from making false images: morals decay when those who craft false images of God start acting habitually as if there is really no god, since the gods being worshipped are simply the products of human hands.

¹⁶ This distinction is elaborated in *On the Divine Images*, III, 27-40, 82-88.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 16, 23; Kotter III, p. 89.

bodiless, invisible, formless, and colorless Godhead, we reject it as a falsehood. If anyone should make images to give glory, honor, and worship to the devil and his demons, we abhor them and deliver them to the flames. Or if anyone make idols of men, birds, reptiles, or any creature, we anathematize him Even under the old dispensation, Israel never built temples named for men or celebrated the memory of men But since divine nature has assumed our nature, we have been given a life-bearing and saving remedy, which has glorified our nature and led it to incorruption.¹⁸

And this understanding about fashioning images of Christ is what leads to the justification of icons of the saints, for they are not set up as idols of gods to be worshipped, but as incentives to remember the mercy of God at work in his saints:

If you make an image of Christ, and not of the saints, it is evident that you do not forbid images, but refuse to honor the saints. You make images of Christ as one who is glorified, yet you deprive the saints of their rightful glory, and call truth falsehood. The Lord says, 'I will glorify those who glorify me' (I Sam. 2:30) The saints during their earthly lives were filled with the Holy Spirit, and when they fulfill their course, the grace of the Holy Spirit does not depart from their souls or their bodies in the tombs, or from their likenesses and holy images, not by the nature of these things, but by grace and power.¹⁹

John's defense of the whole range of sacred icons, not just icons of the Savior but of the Theotokos and the saints as well, rests on his recognition that it is only by God's grace that any human being is sanctified. He rejects the claim that honoring these images is a kind of idolatry as a misunderstanding, a confusion between genuine worship of the true God and veneration of the saints as divinely polished images of God Himself, and thus a human activity that actually contributes to true worship. His rejection of the confusions of this position preserves yet another important distinction within his arsenal of arguments. Images can be mistakenly worshipped as God,²⁰ so we need to determine the intention of those who make and those who use them.²¹

Besides the arguments cast from scripture and tradition discussed above,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 11, 58; Kotter III, pp. 99-100.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 19, 26-27; Kotter III, pp. 94-95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 8, 55-56.

²¹ *Ibid.*, II, 10, 58; Kotter III, p. 99.

John proposes a set of arguments whose tenor is Aristotelian, yet whose outcome would have surprised their source, for the strongly transcendent character of Aristotle's god, conceived as the prime mover in the *Physics*, or, if it is possible, conceived even more remotely as the purely final cause of the *Metaphysics*, removes from Aristotle's purview virtually all questions of worship and prayer. But, true to his own religious convictions, John finds in the Aristotelian theory of knowledge a bulwark for the defense of his position on icons that can reinforce his arguments from scripture and tradition.

Aristotle's theory of knowledge generally held less attraction for early Christian thinkers than Christianized versions of its chief ancient rival, the Platonic doctrine of recollection of the Ideas or perfect Forms. While straightforward Platonism in epistemology bore the unacceptable²² baggage of pre-existent souls needed to explain the state in which souls, pristinely unattached to bodies, are free of the impediments of matter that obscure the perfect knowledge of Ideas, the modified Platonism in various neo-Platonic figures offered Christian thinkers just the sort of epistemological explanation suited to the schema of their own religious commitments, e.g., the illumination theory of Augustine or the comparable doctrine of the Cappadocians. Their natural attraction to Platonic views on the immortality of the soul, the superiority of the soul to the body, and even the hints of the doctrine of creation in Plato's *Timaeus* all endeared them to a Platonic approach to the theory of knowledge.

Aristotle's common sense realism on the question of knowledge was not so much disowned as surpassed by Platonism's ability to ground eternal truths in the eternal ideas of the mind of God. It may well be that a given thinker's inclination in this matter is related to the way the basic problem is pictured. If the problem of knowing is configured as a project to explain how all the various forms of day-to-day knowing, including the hard-won struggle for the necessity of the conclusions in mundane sciences, the Aristotelian approach through abstraction from representative data acquired by sense perception and the scientific demonstration that some nominal definition is actually an essential definition²³ will have the edge. But if the problem is configured as a project to explain how eternal truths are eternally true, and how essences are unchanging,

²² The doctrine of the existence of human souls prior to their embodiment came to be judged unacceptable to Christian orthodoxy, but not without a hearing. Origen seems to have held for the doctrine, and there is a distinct, albeit minority, position within the ranks of modern scholarship on Augustine that maintains that Augustine also held some version of this doctrine. See especially the works of Robert F. O'Connell, S.J.

²³ See Aristotle, *Prior Analytics* and *Posterior Analytics*. I have discussed the problem of justifying essential definitions in an earlier article, "Aristotle on Signifying Definitions" in *The New Scholasticism* 54 (1980), pp. 75-86.

perfect, and absolute, the essentialism of Platonic metaphysics will always remain the more attractive approach.

John of Damascus clearly favors an Aristotelian account of the generation of knowledge, even in the service of the contemplation of heavenly realities. As a defender of the manifestation of the Divine within human flesh, and thereby the appropriateness of the prayerful generation of icons of the Incarnate Word by human artistry, he has the possibility of going in either direction: an icon could be treated as an imperfect copy of the perfect and transcendent reality, thereby emphasizing our distance from the divine and the ultimate ineffability of the divine nature,²⁴ or an icon could be treated as a divinely guided human artifact, composite of matter and form,²⁵ thereby emphasizing the nearness of God through the Incarnation. John of Damascus clearly respects the former but is strongly committed to the latter. In the related area of how we human beings know what we know, he likewise prefers to emphasize the human mind's ability to penetrate the form present in corporeal objects perceived by the senses along the lines Aristotle recorded as the cognitive process rather than according to the recollection-model proposed by Plato and transmitted through various forms of Platonism.²⁶ Elsewhere in his writings his use of Aristotle's epistemological categories and procedures is patent not only in the *Dialectica* ("Philosophical

²⁴ This approach historically seems to lead to the iconoclastic position. Eusebius of Caesarea, for instance, drew the iconoclastic conclusion from the rather Platonic position of Origen's system. Arguing that any icon of Christ would present him in the image of his enslavement to the flesh and thus obscure the brilliance of his Divinity, which is beyond presentation in earthly forms, Eusebius touts the independence of the "true gnostic" who contemplates the Word's divine glory without the corruptions of sensory images. See George Florovsky, *The Byzantine Fathers of the Sixth to Eighth Century*, vol. 9 of *The Collected Works of George Florovsky*, ed. Richard S. Haugh, trans. by Raymond Miller and Anne-Marie Döllinger-Labriolle (Vaduz: Bücherbetriebsanstalt, 1987), p. 277.

²⁵ John of Damascus is at pains at many places in *On the Divine Images* to defend the basic goodness of matter as well as its further sanctification by the divine gift of the Incarnation. For example, at II, 13-14, 60-62, he argues for the goodness of matter against the Manicheanism latent in iconoclasm and makes a careful distinction between the iconoclast's accusation of matter-worship and his own reverence for the place matter has played in salvation history: "I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter, who became matter for me, taking up His abode in matter, and accomplishing my salvation through matter. 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' It is obvious to everyone that flesh is matter, and that it is created. I salute matter and I approach it with reverence, and I worship that through which my salvation has come." (II, 14, 61)

²⁶ For a more detailed discussion of various Platonic models of epistemology within the history of Neo-Platonism, see John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists, 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977).

Chapters”) that constitute the first portion of *The Fount of Knowledge* but in even the highly speculative theological discussions of *The Orthodox Faith*.²⁷

Like any visible objects, icons are corporeal realities, and every corporeal substance has a nature, a form that gives an intelligible structure to the object.²⁸ This arrangement within physical substances in general applies to all the artifacts produced by human hands, but with additional complexity in the case of objects that are the result of human artifice. Besides the presence of substantial forms within the materials from which they are made, there is a dominant organizing form imposed on them by their maker that gives them a certain unity, not just the unity of purpose of some externally bound aggregation of separate things, but a principle of order that makes them one object. The icon, if it were considered as but a heaping of colors on a piece of wood, would have a unity no greater than the duration of the paint’s adhesion to the wood. But considered as a painting, it has the greater unity of ordered design that is achieved to a greater or lesser extent by the practical intelligence of the artist. And considered precisely as icon, it has a yet fuller unity by the order within the object portrayed, especially the face of a person living the eternal life that is God’s.²⁹ It is this last consideration that distinguishes the production of any icon from any other painting—there is a sacred asceticism involved. And yet it is not just the act of the icon’s production but the act of contemplation and reverence for what is being adored or revered that brings John of Damascus to a preference for the Aristotelian understanding of human knowing. He is constantly alert to our human need for visible models for understanding anything,³⁰ including our halting efforts at understanding the divine, for the human effort to know God at all would be frustrated were it not for the divine manifestation of His image in a visible, material form through the Incarnation.³¹ This is not the Platonic suspicion about the material and its standard interpretation of images as triggering an *anamnesis* of what the soul once saw perfectly, but a constant recourse to the Aristotelian description of the generation of knowledge by discernment and abstraction of a form from its material composite, such that by visible images genuinely present to a knower, and at various points in one’s life truly new to

²⁷ George Florovsky notes the use of this Aristotelian epistemology in John of Damascus’ exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity in *The Orthodox Faith*, FOC vol. 37, pp. 165-406; see esp. p. 259.

²⁸ See, for example, chapter 41 of *The Fount of Knowledge*, FOC vol. 37, pp. 65-66.

²⁹ John argues that the saints revered in holy icons are present to God, and thus should not truly be considered dead, but even more alive than earthly mortals, and that the miraculous powers exhibited by certain icons is a sign of this life. See I, 19, 26-27.

³⁰ For instance, *On the Divine Images*, III, 17, 74 and III, 24, 79.

³¹ See the opening chapters of *The Orthodox Faith*.

the knower, icons and other images present to the mind the forms by which we can see even the invisible things of God.

This Aristotelian doctrine of knowledge, referred to at various points in the course of the treatise, reinforces the importance of the making of images for true worship which he fundamentally defends on scriptural and traditional grounds. There is, for instance, the following passage from the Appendix to the first treatise that begs a reader with Neo-Platonic sentiments about the gap between the spiritual and the sensory to recall the normal human state of affairs:

The apostles saw the Lord with bodily eyes; others saw the apostles, and others the martyrs. I too desire to see them both spiritually and physically and receive the remedy by which the ills of both soul and body (for I am composed of both) may be healed. What I see with my eyes I venerate, but not as God; I revere that which portrays what I honor. You, perhaps, are superior to me, and have risen so far above bodily things that you have become virtually immaterial and feel free to make light of all visible things, but since I am human and clothed with a body, I desire to see and be present with the saints physically. Condescend from your heights to my lowly state of mind, for by doing so you will make your lofty position safe. God accepts my longing for Him and for His saints.³²

The thrust of his remarks are to counter any such Platonic tendencies that verge toward iconoclasm by honoring only the immaterial and making light of the material. The argument here also finds support in the Aristotelian version of anthropology (the genuinely composite nature of human existence, in contrast to the Platonic vision of the human being as a soul imprisoned, or more optimistically, using a body).³³

In the third treatise, just after praising the early Church Fathers for resorting to non-biblical phrases like “homoousios” and the philosophical nuances of the Chalcedonian formula “One person with two natures” to preserve the truths of biblical faith,³⁴ John propounds the thoroughly Aristotelian thesis that “it is impossible for us to think without using physical images” to explain both Our Lord’s blessing of the senses and the appropriateness of icons:

³² *On the Divine Images*, 37 (Appendix to Treatise 1); Kotter III, p. 148.

³³ Throughout *On the Divine Images* John is anxious to combine the biblical theme that the human being is made in the image and likeness of God with the Aristotelian theme of human nature as the composite of matter and form, body and soul. See, for instance, II, 2, 51; II, 14, 61; III, 20, 76, and III, 26, 81.

³⁴ *On the Divine Images* III, 11, 71.

The Lord called His disciples blessed, for He said, 'Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and kings longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it' (Mt. 13:16-17). The apostles saw Christ in the flesh; they witnessed His sufferings and His miracles, and heard His words. We too desire to see, and to hear, and so be filled with gladness. They saw Him face to face, since He was physically present. Since He is no longer physically present, we hear His words read from books and by hearing our souls are sanctified and filled with blessing, and so we worship, honoring the books from which we hear His words. So also, through the painting of images, we are able to contemplate the likeness of His bodily form, His miracles, and His passion, and thus are sanctified, blessed, and filled with joy. Reverently we honor and worship His bodily form, and by contemplating His bodily form, we form a notion, as far as is possible for us, of the glory of His divinity. Since we are fashioned of both soul and body, and our souls are not naked spirits, but are covered, as it were, with a fleshly veil, it is impossible for us to think without using physical images. Just as we physically listen to perceptible words in order to understand spiritual things, so also by using bodily sight we reach spiritual contemplation. For this reason Christ assumed both soul and body, since man is fashioned from both.³⁵

III: CONCLUSION

The richness of this first Christian attempt at a systematic theological defense of icons includes a rather sophisticated use of philosophical strategies. Were opposition to icons limited to biblical objections from the Decalog, John of Damascus might have rested content with arguments about the historical significance of the Incarnation as changing the prohibitions laid down to prevent idolatry. But mindful of opposition to icons from within the ranks of religious believers sincerely concerned about the ineffability of God and convinced of the utter superiority of the spiritual to the sensory world on philosophical grounds of Platonic provenance, he takes up various philosophical tools to defend the making and veneration of icons. To design an adequate response to the line of argument in natural theology traceable as far back as Xenophanes, he makes use of the concept of "person" as a term embracing God, angels and human

³⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 12, 72; Kotter III, pp. 123-24.

beings that had been articulated by his Cappadocian forebears in their unexpected philosophical progress when confronting various Christological and Trinitarian issues. His typology of images and his analysis of their veneration in true worship employ a distinctly Aristotelian brand of epistemology and anthropology. He is not without respect for a theory of divine ideas in the mind of God that has modified Platonic roots, but his profound sense of the fundamental goodness of material creation, plus his admiration for the additional dignity bestowed on matter by the healing touch of the Incarnation, leave him often in debt to the Aristotelian heritage even as he tries to place philosophy in service of theology.