Abba Serapion’s God: The Theology of Imaging the Divine in the Early Church

I

In the tenth Conference of Abba Isaac on prayer, John Cassian recounts the cautionary tale of Abba Serapion.¹ The venerable Serapion ‘surpassed nearly all the monks both by his commendable life and by his advanced age’.² But like most of the desert monks, he took scripture’s testimony that God had created Adam in his own image to mean that God himself had a human form. The priests who presided over three of the four churches in the desert shared this view, but the priest of Serapion’s community, Paphnutius, regarded it as serious heresy and, concerned for Serapion’s spiritual welfare, tried many times to persuade him otherwise. All his efforts were, however, in vain.

Then one day a visitor arrived, a learned deacon from Cappadocia by the name of Photinus. Seeing his opportunity, Paphnutius called an assembly of the brothers and setting Photinus before them asked him how the Catholic churches of the East interpreted the saying, “Let us make man according to our image and likeness”? Photinus replied that all without exception understood it, ‘not according to the lowly sound of the letter but in a spiritual way’, and he argued at length in support of this reading, adducing many examples from Scripture to show that the immeasurable, incomprehensible and invisible majesty of God could never be circumscribed in a human form, nor an incorporeal, non-composite nature ‘be apprehended by the eye or seized by the mind’.³

At last Serapion was persuaded to accept the faith of the Catholic tradition, and all his brothers rejoiced and gave thanks that God had not permitted such a virtuous old man to go astray merely through ignorance and rustic naïveté. But their joy was cut short by the sound of Serapion sobbing bitterly. Then as they watched, the old man threw himself on the ground with a loud groan and cried out,

Well is me, wretch that I am! They have taken my God from me, and I have no one to lay hold of, nor do I know whom I should adore or address.⁴

Greatly shaken and suspecting Serapion to be the victim of demonic delusion, Cassian and his companions asked Abba Isaac how the old man could have fallen into such error. Isaac reassured them that it was due entirely to his simplicity and habituation to the ancient error of the pagans according to which they insisted on images they could ‘approach with their petitions, circumscribe in their minds, and keep constantly before their eyes’. Whereas in the past such people had worshipped demons in human form, now they sought to adore the ‘incomprehensible and ineffable majesty of the true Deity … under the limitations of some image.’ It is against such errors, said Isaac, that the following text is especially well directed: ‘They changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of an image of a corruptible man’.⁵

¹ Cassian, Conference 10.II.2—III.5, trans. Ramsey with slight amendment.
² Conf. 10.III.1.
³ Conf. 10.III.2-3.
⁴ Conf. 10.III.4-5.
⁵ Conf. 10.IV.1-2.
Cassian’s tale of Abba Serapion touches upon all of the main aspects of the problem that the use of devotional imagery in whatsoever form posed for the early Church, namely:

(i) How to reconcile an instinct to use of devotional imagery with the Second Commandment, which in the LXX reads, “You shall not make for yourself an eidōlon, nor likeness of anything, whatever things are in the heaven above and whatever are in the earth below and whatever are in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them nor serve them…”6 While eidōlon can mean ‘idol’, it can also mean ‘image of a God’, or simply ‘image’ or ‘likeness’.

(ii) How Adam’s creation in the image of God is to be understood, and thus how God can be imaged. Associated with this question is the supposition that to image God in sense-perceptible, and by extension imaginary or conceptual, terms must necessarily mean to circumscribe him and succumb to a more or less subtle form of idolatry. Hence the ambiguity in the title of this paper: the expression ‘Imaging the Divine’ can refer either to visual depiction of God or to the human person as the image of God, questions that were seen as closely related: as the second century apologist Minucius Felix put it, ‘What image can I make of God when, rightly considered, man himself is an image of God?’7

(iii) The association of cultic images with Graeco-Roman and Egyptian paganism. This was felt with particular acuteness in Egypt, whose native religion recognised a plethora of animal and animal/human hybrid gods who seemed to exemplify the errors of paganism and provide abundant evidence of the spiritual dangers attendant upon trying to represent the divine in visual terms. It was to Abba Serapion’s formation within this culture that Abba Isaac attributed his ‘habituation to ancient error’.

(iv) More generally, the intellectual culture of the world into which Christianity was born, both in Egypt and elsewhere, was rooted in classical Greece, which meant that the best of its philosophical and spiritual consciousness was formed by Platonism. This was an hospitable environment for the new religion; indeed, such was the perceived congruence between the teachings of Plato and Christ that the early Greek Fathers assumed that Plato had learned his wisdom from Moses. One of the areas of apparent agreement was Platonism’s prioritisation of the intelligible world over the physical and the soul over the body, and its associated belief that images are ontologically inferior copies of their prototypes.8

The combined effect of these four factors was that for the first two centuries of its existence Christianity categorically rejected not only all images, but all art. So sweeping was the prohibition that Ernst Kitzinger remarks in his magisterial study, The Cult of Images in the Age Before Iconoclasm that ‘in the entire history of European art it is difficult to name any one fact more momentous than the admission of the graven image by the Christian Church.’4 There were perhaps occasional exceptions to this rule: Eusebius,

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6 Deut. 5:8-9.
8 See especially Plato, Republic ??
Bishop of Caesarea from 314 until his death in 339 claims in his *History of the Church* to have ‘examined images of the apostles Paul and Peter and indeed of Christ Himself preserved in painting’, and John of Damascus cites several accounts of saints praying before icons, including Mary of Egypt praying before an icon of Our Lady and John Chrysostom keeping vigil before an icon of ‘the wise Paul’. But in general the acceptance by the Church of devotional imagery seems to have been a gradual process, beginning with the appearance in Christian assembly rooms and cemeteries of ‘decorative and symbolic devices, narrative and didactic images’ that posed no threat of idolatry.

During the fourth century the adoption of other material props not barred by specific prohibitions, most notably crosses and relics, became increasingly widespread. Veneration of the cross received a major impetus ‘through the symbolic identification of the instrument of Christ’s Passion with the victorious standard of [Constantine]’ and by the end of the century was accepted practice. However, the first mention of the use of images per se in Christian devotion comes from Augustine, who includes among those who had introduced superstitious practices into the Church ‘worshippers of tombs and paintings’ (sepulcrorum et picturarum adoratores).

Over the next three centuries the cult of Christian images gathered both momentum and respectability, and in 692 the Quinisext Council approved the representation of Christ in his human form. But within forty years iconoclasm had regained the upper hand and was not finally defeated until the year 843 when, in definitive acknowledgement of the implications of the Incarnation for the possibility of imaging the divine, icon veneration was given comprehensively articulated doctrinal acceptance in the only victory over heresy ever to be dignified with the title Triumph of Orthodoxy. In the remainder of this paper I shall focus on some of the key moments in this journey.

II

For Origen (c.180-252), the great Alexandrian catechist, preacher, scholar and pioneer of biblical exegesis and systematic theology, the impossibility of depicting God is axiomatic: the opening sentence of his treatise *On First Principles* reads, ‘I am aware that there are some who will try to maintain that even according to our scriptures God is a body, since they find it written in the books of Moses, ‘Our God is a consuming fire’, and in the Gospel according to John, ‘God is spirit, and they who worship him must worship in spirit and truth’. Now these men will have it that fire and spirit are body and nothing else.’ But, Origen goes on to argue, those who think like this are mistaken: God is incomprehensible,

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9 According to my notes, Hist. eccles. VII.8.4, cited by Mango (1986: 16), but I can’t find the reference.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 90.
15 *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 1, 34, cited at Kitzinger (1954: 92).
immeasurable and ‘far and away better than our thoughts about him’. As a simple intellectual existence, God is naturally invisible, and the vision of God that the pure in heart shall enjoy is not a physical seeing but an intellectual knowing. Christ alone, the ‘firstborn of all creation’, is the ‘image of the invisible God’, but only by his divinity: he ‘is the Word, and therefore we must understand that nothing in him is perceptible to the senses. He is wisdom, and in wisdom we must not suspect the presence of anything corporeal’. The human being is in turn the image of Christ, and this image too is wholly incorporeal, residing in the interior person, that is to say, the nous. Since God cannot be visually represented, he is not honoured when vulgar workmen make images of Him in lifeless material objects. Instead, the images and votive offerings appropriate to God are the virtues formed in us by the divine Logos according to his own pattern. The invisibility of God and his image does not prevent Origen from resorting on occasion to visual metaphor: again in On First Principles he likens God the Father to a huge statue that fills the cosmos, the Son being an identical statue but smaller, in order that it might be apprehended by our intellectual sight. And in his Contra Celsum he writes, ‘Of all the images in creation, the most excellent by far is that which is in our Saviour, who said: ‘The Father is inside me’. And a statue (agalma) in the image of God the Creator is present in each of those who endeavour to imitate him. They made that statue by contemplating God with a pure heart. 

Despite the controversy that he attracted even during his lifetime, Origen’s seminal role as exegete and theologian means that his subsequent influence has been profound and ubiquitous, and in his study “Origen, Eusebius and the Iconoclastic Controversy”, George Florovsky argues that ‘the key argument in the whole system of the Iconoclastic reasoning’ came from a letter written by Origen’s disciple Eusebius of Caesarea to a sister of Constantine named Constantia Augusta in which Eusebius responds to her request that he send her an ‘image of Christ’. I quote from Florovsky’s account of the letter’s contents:

17 DP 1.1.5.
18 DP 1.1.6.
19 DP 1.1.8.
20 DP 1.1.9.
21 Col. 1:15.
24 CF. C.Cels. 8.17.
25 DP 1.2.8, cited by Ramelli (2013: 184).
26 C.Cels. 8.17—18.
27 Florovsky (1950: 84).
Eusebius was astonished. What kind of an image did she mean? Nor could he understand why she should want one. Was it a true and unchangeable image, which would have in itself Christ’s character? Or was it the image he had assumed when he took upon himself, for our sake, the form of a servant? The first … is obviously inaccessible to man; only the Father knows the Son.

As for the form of a servant, this has now been amalgamated with his Divinity:

After his ascension into heaven he had changed that form of a servant into the splendour which, by anticipation, he had revealed to his disciples (at the Transfiguration) and which was higher than human nature. Obviously this splendour cannot be depicted by lifeless colours and shades … His previous form has been transfigured and transformed into that splendour ineffable that passes the measure of any eye or ear. No image of this new ‘form’ is conceivable, if this ‘deified and intelligible substance’ can still be called a ‘form’. We cannot follow the example of the pagan artists who would depict things that cannot be depicted, and whose pictures are therefore without any genuine likeness. Thus, the only available image would be just an image in the state of humiliation. Yet, all such images are formally prohibited in the Law, nor are any such known in the churches. To have such images would have meant to follow the way of the idolatrous pagans. We, Christians, acknowledge Christ as the Lord and God, and we are preparing ourselves to contemplate him as God, in the purity of our hearts. If we want to anticipate this glorious image, before we meet him face to face, there is but one Good Painter, the Word of God himself.28

Origen’s interpretation of the human image of God as located in the nous or rational soul alone was taken up by the subsequent tradition. But there were dissenting voices, most notoriously in the Anthropomorphite Controversy that took place in Egypt in 399. Cassian’s account of which establishes the context for his tale of Serapion. It was the custom in Egypt that each year, usually on the Feast of the Epiphany, the Bishop of Alexandria would issue a festal letter announcing the dates of Lent and Easter and dealing with any pressing issues. In 399 Bishop Theophilus used this letter to argue against and condemn the ‘foolish heresy’ of those – that is, the Anthropomorphites – who believed Gen. 1:26 to mean that God had human form. But since the majority of the monks shared Serapion’s view, the letter was, to say the least, not well received: according to the historian Socrates a mob of monks marched on the episcopal palace threatening to kill Theophilus unless he recanted. His response was to tell them, ‘In seeing you, I behold the face of God’.29 He then proceeded to have the anti-Anthropomorphite monks expelled from Egypt. They fled to Constantinople where John Chrysostom gave them sanctuary.

The monks Theophilus expelled from the Egyptian desert belonged to the circle that had formed around Evagrius of Pontus, Evagrius himself having providentially died that same Epiphany. Evagrius was a follower of Origen and protégé of the Cappadocian Fathers, who themselves held Origen in great esteem. For Evagrius the highest form of prayer is marked by an absence not only of images but of concepts and even language, all of which partake of a multiplicity alien to the nature of God. Evagrius’ teachings on imageless prayer were almost certainly influenced by Gregory of Nyssa, who describes the higher reaches

28 Ibid., 85.
29 Cf. Clarke (??: 45).
of the spiritual life in terms of allegorical readings of Moses’ ascent of Mount Sinai and the nuptial imagery of the Song of Songs, which to some extent become interchangeable metaphors for him. He writes of Moses’ entry into the cloud that ‘leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, [the nous] keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence’s yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and incomprehensible, and there it sees God’.  
30 And noting that God ‘made the darkness his hiding place’,  
31 Gregory interprets Song 3:1, ‘By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth’ as ‘the contemplation of the invisible, just as Moses entered into the darkness where God was’.  
32 For Evagrius too the image of the incorporeal God resides in the incorporeal human nous. The nous is by nature receptive, in effect a mirror designed to be turned toward its Creator and reflect his glory. But ordinarily this mirror is turned instead toward the distractions of the world whose impressions clutter it up so that it no longer has the clarity to discern the presence of God. Accordingly, Evagrius advises, ‘When you pray do not form images of the divine within yourself, nor allow your nous to be impressed with any form, but approach the Immaterial immaterially and you will come to understanding’.  
31 For Evagrius, the ‘nakedness’ of the pure nous recalls the nakedness of Adam and Eve before the fall, and anticipates the eschatological restoration of the whole of creation to perfect union with God. John Cassian was Evagrius’ disciple, and his story of Serapion’s error introduces his own account of imageless prayer

III

The reservations of theologians notwithstanding, the use of devotional imagery became increasingly widespread from the fifth century onwards, and when in 532-7 the church of Hagia Sofia was built at the command of the Emperor Justinian and equipped with icons, “the icon had come of age as an art form and occupied the most holy place in the church building. It had also come to occupy a central place in the life of the Byzantines on all levels. On the popular level miracle stories multiplied around icons; the touch of an icon was thought to have curative powers and saints were imagined to step out of icons to help people in need.”  
33 In tandem with the proliferation of devotional imagery came a development in theology that offered a route to its vindication: the appearance in the early 530s of a body of writings purporting to be the work of Dionysius the Areopagite, the Athenian convert of St Paul on the Areopagus mentioned in Acts 17:34. In his treatise On the Divine Names the mysterious author whom we now know to have been steeped in late antique pagan Neoplatonic philosophy and accordingly refer to as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite  
34 draws upon his erudition to show how, since God is the cause of all he creates, he is present in his creation in the same way that any cause is present in all of its effects. According to Dionysius, God

30 Life of Moses, 2.162.
31 Ps. 18:11.
32 Sixth Homily on the Song of Songs.
31 Chapters on Prayer 66.
34 For a persuasive argument that the pseudonym was devotional in intent, see Charles M Stang, Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: ‘No Longer I’, Oxford Early Christian Studies, Oxford University Press, 2012.
as Cause of all ‘is rightly nameless and yet has the names of everything that is’.\(^{35}\) The causal activity of God includes, but is not confined to, what we would understand today by causality, since, following Aristotle, Neoplatonism recognized four distinct causal modalities: formal, efficient, material and final. Our modern notion of a cause, as for example when hitting a billiard ball causes it to move, corresponds to the efficient cause, and for Dionysius God, the First Good, is indeed the efficient cause of the whole of creation. But he is also the formal cause – that which gives every existent its form, its particular and unique identity, and the final cause – the goal and perfection of all existents for which they yearn and toward which they tend.\(^{36}\) He is therefore present in each and every existent as the cause of what it is, the reason that it is, and the end or telos in which it is perfected. The cosmos is understood to be a hierarchy, a sacred order,\(^{35}\) in which the physical points beyond itself to the intelligible, and thence to its Creator.

Dionysius was not the first to have the insight that, for those with eyes to see, the world of the senses discloses that of the spirit: it is central to the thought of Evagrius, who likened creation to a love letter from God,\(^{37}\) and Augustine, for whom the goodness and beauty of the natural world bear witness to and praise its Creator.\(^{38}\) But Dionysius expressed the insight in terms which laid bare its logic: “Just as, by virtue of the hierarchic order of the universe, there is an ascent from the lower and sensual to the higher and intellectual sphere and ultimately to God, so, in turn, God is reflected, according to the law of universal harmony and in gradual descent, in the lower orders and ultimately even in the material objects which make up our physical surroundings.”\(^{39}\)

Applied to the relation between image and prototype, this line of reasoning overturns the view of images as ontologically inferior copies by revealing that an image reflects, and in a sense embodies, its prototype in the same way that an effect reflects, and in a sense embodies, its cause. The connection between image and prototype, effect and cause, is mediated by the unbroken ontological chain reaching from the physical world all the way up to the Supreme Cause. And since every creature can be said to image its Creator in the same way that an effect can be said to image its cause, the human body could now be seen as imaging God. Kitzinger remarks upon the rich irony of this view relative to the Church’s earlier understanding: ‘Nothing’, he says, ‘points up more dramatically the change which the attitude of the church towards art had undergone in the course of time than the fact that Genesis 1:27 came to be used in a sense exactly opposite to that found in the early Fathers’.\(^{40}\) A parallel irony obtains on the Platonic side, since Christians who emphasised the impossibility of visually representing the Divine might have found support in the cornerstone of Neoplatonic negative theology, Plato’s description of the Good as beyond

\(^{35}\) On the Divine Names, 1.7.

\(^{36}\) Cf., e.g., On the Divine Names, 1.7: ‘Truly he has dominion over all and all things revolve around him, for his is their cause, their source and their destiny. He is “all in all”, as scripture affirms, and certainly he is to be praised as being for all things the creator and originator, the One who brings them to completion, their preserver, their protector and their home, the power which returns them to itself, and all this in the one single, irrepressible, and supreme act. For the unnamed goodness is not just the cause of cohesion or life or perfection so that it is from this or that providential gesture that it earns a name, but it actually contains everything beforehand within itself.’ \(^{35}\) Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, The Celestial Hierarchy, 3.1.

\(^{37}\) Cf. Letter to Melania, 5 ff.


\(^{39}\) Kitzinger (1954: 139).

\(^{40}\) Kitzinger (1954: 140).
both being and knowledge.\footnote{ref.} But now the Platonic tradition had developed an account of how, the transcendence of the Good notwithstanding, it is connected as formal, efficient and final cause to the lowliest physical object via the ‘great chain of being’ such that insofar as anything exists, it participates in, and so reflects and embodies, the Supreme Good.

The seventh century also saw another important development in that the Incarnation was for the first time accepted as justification for religious imagery. This argument had in fact been around for a long time, Eusebius of Caesarea having reckoned with it.\footnote{Kitzinger (1954: 141-2) notes that this argument had appeared very early, Eusebius having reckoned with it.} But it finally came of age in 692 when Canon 82 of the Quinisext Council stated that: ‘In order to expose to the sight of all, at least with the help of painting, that which is perfect, we decree that henceforth Christ our God be represented in His human form and not in the ancient form of the lamb. We understand this to be the elevation of the humility of God the Word, and we are led to remembering His life in the flesh, His passion, His saving death and, thus, deliverance which took place for the world.’\footnote{Cited at Ouspensky (1992: 92-3).}

IV

The widespread expansion of the cult of the icon that took place during the fifth and sixth centuries did not signal the end of all opposition to devotional imagery, but it was not until the second quarter of the eighth century that the full reaction to these developments found expression in the iconoclast movement. It was in response to the two phases of the Iconoclast Controversy that John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite constructed the theological defence of icon veneration. They did so by building on the twin foundations of the Quinisext Council and the principle derived from Dionysius’ theology of causality that ‘in their capacity as reflections [certain] objects may be called εἰκόνες’.\footnote{Kitzinger (1954: 139).}

In the first round of the controversy the iconoclasts argued that a material object could only be holy if it had been solemnly blessed by a priest and thereby raised from the natural to the supernatural, meaning that ‘only the Holy Gifts could be confessed as an icon of Christ’.\footnote{Ouspensky (1978: 122-3).} They reasoned that ‘only something identical to its prototype could be considered a real icon’,\footnote{Ibid.} and since images do not bear this identity they ‘pretend to be God’\footnote{Anderson (2000: 8).} and are consequently idols. They also argued that ‘the superiority of spirit to matter made it inappropriate to use material images in spiritual worship’.\footnote{Roth (1981: 9).}

John of Damascus replied that, on the contrary, an icon cannot be identical to its prototype, the sole exception being the Son as the natural icon or image of the Father,\footnote{Anderson (2000: 9).} and even here the identity is not
complete, since although the Son bears the entire Father within himself and is equal to him in all things, he is begotten while the Father is the Begetter; ‘it is the nature of the Father to cause; the Son is the effect’.\(^9\)

With regard to the Iconoclast objection to the use of material elements in devotional contexts he insisted that ‘salvation is connected precisely with matter, since it is actualised in the hypostatic union of God with human flesh’,\(^50\) and quotes ‘St Dionysius the Areopagite’ on how images have a divine origin and are ‘visible manifestations of hidden and marvellous wonders’.\(^51\)

For John, the Incarnation meant that ‘a decisive and eternal change’ had taken place in the relationship between God and material creation\(^52\) such that God can now be depicted ‘clothed in human form’.\(^53\)

The Second Commandment is not applicable to Christian imagery: ‘In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh…I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator who became matter for my sake’.\(^54\)

John offered further clarification by distinguishing between ‘absolute worship, or adoration (\(\text{latreia}\))’, which is due to God alone,\(^55\) and relative worship, or veneration (\(\text{proskinēsis}, \text{‘bowing down’}\)),\(^56\) which is due not only to Christ the incarnate God, but to our Lady the Theotokos, the saints\(^57\) and to other Christians, who are also images of Christ,\(^58\) and cited Basil of Caesarea as saying that ‘any honour given to an image is transferred to its prototype’.\(^59\)

The Orthodox won the day, and the first round of the iconoclast controversy concluded with the Seventh Ecumenical Council, held in Nicea in 787, which ruled in favour of icon veneration. But within thirty years the controversy re-ignited. This time the iconoclasts responded to the incarnational argument for icons by proposing a christological dilemma: ‘In a portrait of Christ, either the divine nature is portrayed along with the human nature or it is not. Divinity cannot be portrayed. Either the divine nature is confused with the human nature, which is monophysitism; or else, if the human nature alone is portrayed, the two natures are separated, which is Nestorianism.’\(^60\)

Theodore the Studite replied with a dilemma of his own: ‘If Christ cannot be portrayed, then either he lacks a genuine human nature (which is docetism) or his human nature is submerged in His divinity (which is monophysitism).’\(^61\)

According to the council of Chalcedon (451), Christ was ‘in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation’.\(^62\) It follows that he must be susceptible of portrayal \(\text{qua} \) human being: ‘If his two natures are not separated, then the one portrayed must be the incarnate God, even though the divine nature

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\(^50\) Ouspensky (1978: 129).
\(^52\) Anderson (1980: 8).
\(^53\) First Apology, 8.
\(^54\) First Apology, 16.
\(^55\) Third Apology, 28.
\(^56\) Cf. Third Apology, 27 ff.
\(^57\) Cf. First Apology, 21.
\(^58\) Cf. Third Apology, 37.
\(^59\) Third Apology, 41.
\(^60\) Roth (1981: 11).
\(^61\) Roth (1981: 11).
\(^62\) Ibid.
itself cannot be portrayed’. The Incarnation is ‘a mixture of the immiscible, a compound of the uncombinable: that is, of the uncircumscribed with the circumscribed, of the boundless with the bounded, of the limitless with the limited, of the formless with the well-formed … For this reason Christ is depicted in images, and the invisible is seen. He who in his own divinity is uncircumscribable accepts the circumscription natural to His body. Both natures are revealed by the facts for what they are’. Theodore also elaborated on the relationship between image and prototype: ‘The image belongs to the Aristotelian category of relative things (πρός τι), and so directs the attention from itself to its prototype’ since ‘the copy shares the glory of the prototype, as a reflection shares the brightness of the light’. There is consequently both a close relation and a precise distinction between image and prototype: it is not the material nature of the image – wood, paint and so forth – that is venerated, but only the likeness of the prototype which appears in [it]. Like John of Damascus, Theodore affirmed that the prototype may be venerated in the image insofar as the image resembles its prototype.

V

The final victory over iconoclasm was won in 843 and designated the Triumph of Orthodoxy. With it, Abba Serapion’s God was at last returned to him and his instinct to pray to an image vindicated. In four hundred years two decisive changes had occurred: firstly, icons had gained ever-increasing popular currency, and secondly, a theoretical basis had been adduced for the admissibility of devotional images. In the process, ‘the image [of Christ] had begun to be thought of not simply as a reminder of the Incarnation, but as an organic part, an extension, or even a re-enactment of it’. The arguments of John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite express a sensibility according to which icons are not only symbols of the holy but mediators between earth and heaven.

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63 Ibid.
64 On the Holy Icons: First Refutation of the Iconoclasts, 2.
65 Roth (1981: 12).
66 First Refutation, 8.
67 Roth (1981: 12).
69 Kitzinger (1954: 142).
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