

“Iconicity and Idolatry” Applied to Disputed Theological Questions

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Introduction

Since the Protestant Reformation, theological disputes between Catholics and Protestants frequently focused on the efficacy of the sacraments, the importance of Mary in salvation history, and the role of the episcopacy in church structures. These clashes were often polemical with opponents ignoring the other’s intentions. Since the Second Vatican Council, there has been an urge for Catholics and Protestants to work towards unity and develop a mutual understanding of the other’s beliefs. The fruits of the ecumenical movement are evident with the Lutheran-Catholic joint declaration regarding justification, the development of ministerial alliances, and opportunities for ecumenical prayer and service. Despite the progress that has been made, many suspicions regarding Mary, the sacraments, and the episcopacy still exist on both sides. This paper applies Jean-Luc Marion’s distinction between the icon and the idol to these disputed categories, thereby revealing an ambiguity in how these theological categories function in their respective traditions. Rather than supporting a Protestant or a Catholic position, Marion’s distinction opens up a vista to reflect on how these ideas operate in different ecclesiastical traditions.

Icons and Idols

Regarding the problem of idolatry in Christianity, Alfred North Whitehead states, “In Christian history, the charge of idolatry has been banished to and fro among rival theologians. Probably, if taken in its widest sense, it rests with equal truth on all the main churches, Protestant and Catholic. Idolatry is the necessary product of static dogmas.”¹ Whitehead recognizes that static dogmas fail to preserve

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1965), 141–141.

the mystery of God who always transcends finite categories. Rather than saying 'this is what God is', or 'this is what God commands', we must constantly re-engage the mystery since these beliefs contain a surplus of meaning. Jean-Luc Marion goes beyond Whitehead's claim by clarifying the contrast between the icon and the idol. For Marion, the idol and the icon are in close proximity with one another. Icons can become idols and idols can become icons because of how we approach the object. Marion states, "The icon and the idol are not at all determined as beings against other beings, since the same beings (statues, names, etc.) can pass from one rank to the other. The icon and the idol determine two manners of being for beings, not two classes of beings."² An idol "allows the divine to occur only in man's measure," while the icon "displaces the limits of our visibility to the measure of its own – its glory. It transforms us in its glory by allowing this glory to shine on our face as its mirror. . ."³ Icons are forms of saturated phenomena; they possess a surplus of meaning that point beyond themselves. Idols define and have clear limitations; in contrast, icons overthrow boundaries and permit no clear definitions. Icons disclose and reveal the divine while never fully defining the divine.

Having contrasted the icon with the idol, we may question if sacraments, Mary, and the episcopacy are icons or idols. This would be the wrong question to ask since there is no ontological basis to know this; it is how these beliefs function that determine their iconicity or their idolatry. It seems that the sacraments, Mary, and the episcopacy can function as icons or idols depending on how believers approach them. We will individually investigate each of these contested theological beliefs in light of Marion's distinction between the icon and the idol. Once we explore how these beliefs function in their respective traditions, we can develop a deeper ecumenical appreciation of one another's beliefs.

Sacraments as Icons and Idols

Catholic theology describes sacraments as outward signs instituted by Christ which bring about an interior transformation within the recipient. Sacraments cause a real change; they are efficacious through the merits of Jesus Christ who gave his life for the salvation of the world. Traditional Catholic theology explains sacramental

² Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.

³ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 15, 22.

efficacy by means of "*ex opere operato*," meaning sacraments receive their power through Christ rather than the subjective disposition of the celebrant. This Catholic teaching concerning sacramental efficacy provides pastoral support to believers since they are unable to determine if the minister is in a state of grace. This teaching means that sacraments do not depend upon the holiness (or lack thereof) of the minister. Despite the guarantee that sacraments bring about what they signify, *ex opere operato* can be misinterpreted as functioning like magic. Sacraments are not magic since they depend upon the cooperation of the minister (i.e. intention), the recipient (i.e. faith), and the gratuitousness of God. There are many stories of people approaching the sacraments in an idolatrous fashion. Medieval stories of people stealing Eucharistic hosts for gardens and other occult practices demonstrate this since it was believed that manipulating the sacrament resulted in specific effects. Moreover, popular piety concerning Eucharistic miracles led many to accept a crass realism which further promoted an idolatrous understanding of the sacraments. For instance, Thomas Aquinas found it unlikely that the glorified body of Christ would be contained in the supposed Eucharistic miracles since this belief obscures the transcendence of Christ who cannot be contained by these appearances.⁴ Aquinas's own work attempted to mediate a middle position between idolatrous crass realism and impotent empty signification. As icons, sacraments make visible God's action in the lives of the faithful; as idols sacraments are reduced to a form of magic guaranteeing salvation apart from faith.

Many of the Protestant Reformers were suspicious of Catholic sacramental beliefs because of how these beliefs functioned in the lives of ordinary Christians. For example, John Calvin found it repugnant that Catholics believed the body of Christ was present on the altars as in a place, since the glorified body of Christ was in heaven.⁵ Calvin avoids restricting Christ to the element of bread, enclosing Him in bread, detracting from His heavenly glory, and localizing his presence to many places at once.⁶ For Calvin, transubstantiation minimizes Christ's heavenly glory because Christ is brought under corruptible elements of this world. Moreover, transubstantiation ascribes to His body something inappropriate to human nature, namely, the ability to be in many places at once.⁷ Calvin posits that transubstantiation requires Christ to have a double body, one in heaven, and the other in the Eucharist.⁸ Reformers like Calvin sought to protect

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 76, a. 8, body.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter XVII, Section 29.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter XVII, Section 18.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter XVII, Section 18.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter XVII, Section 29.

the transcendence of Christ while Catholic theologians sought to express the mystery of Christ's presence on earth. Both Protestant and Catholic sacramental thought can function as an icon and as an idol. Protestantism can neglect the sacraments as the very medium by which God manifests God's presence and action in the world. In effect, the fear of idolatry creeping into Christian worship can itself become idolatrous since it replaces faith in sacraments as authentic gifts from God with suspicion. Conversely, Catholicism can statically fix this sacramental presence in the world by approaching sacraments apart from the context of faith, the community, and their purpose to transform us into what we celebrate, thereby fostering idolatry.

Mary as an Icon and Idol

Another disputed topic between Protestants and Catholics is the role of Mary in God's plan of salvation. For Catholics Mary is a saint and model of Christian life since she was receptive to God's plan by bearing in her womb the Author of Salvation, the Lamb who would atone for our sins, the giver of the Spirit who came to recreate us. As an icon Mary models discipleship since she trusted in God's plan. Her yes to God was complete and unconditional; she became the model of faith for countless generations. Catholicism focuses on Mary as a model to foster our faith since her submission was made in the midst of difficult circumstances. Mary also reveals a human element in Catholicism because she stands as a witness to the tragedy of human sin; her son died as the result of human sinfulness since he came to offer his life as a ransom for many. Mary's importance as a model for Christian life is iconic hence she orders the attendants at Cana, "Do whatever he tells you."⁹ She never claims to have special privileges as the Mother of God; rather, Mary simply proclaims the greatness of the Lord who has chosen her to participate in the plan of salvation.

Despite Mary's iconicity, popular Catholicism obscures the importance of Jesus's mission by over-emphasizing Mary's role in salvation history. For instance, some Catholic devotions emphasize Mary as a guaranteed means to escape the fires of hell. One example of these devotions is the brown scapular which promises that its wearers will not suffer eternal fire if they die wearing it. It is easy for the scapular to be seen as a guarantee of eternal life, an idol, rather than serving as a devotion which fosters faith in God's goodness and mercy. Moreover, some Catholic writings on Mary over-emphasize her role in salvation since she intercedes for sinners, but these authors neglect

⁹ John 2:5.

the judgment and merits of Christ.¹⁰ One must read Marian writings carefully since statements regarding Mary's intercession and guidance are often qualified. One example of this qualification is found in St. Alphonsus Liguori's Marian praises:

It is impossible for clients of Mary to be damned, if they faithfully honor her and commend themselves to her. At first sight some may think this statement exaggerated. But I would ask them to first read what I am going to say about it. When we maintain that clients of Mary can never be lost, we are not speaking of persons who abuse this devotion so that they can sin more freely. Those who disapprove of preaching so much about Mary's mercy toward sinners, because they say it makes the wicked take advantage of it to sin more freely, are unfair in their judgment, for a sinner who presumes like this deserves punishment for being so rash, and not mercy at all. We are speaking of those clients of Mary who sincerely determine to do better and are faithful in honoring her and recommending themselves to her. I say it is morally impossible for such people to be lost.¹¹

Additionally some Catholics substitute authentic worship of God by substituting pilgrimages to Marian apparitions as replacing active participation in the Sunday Eucharistic celebration. Moreover, popular Catholicism has sometimes used Mary as a means to display God's mercy instead of explicating the biblical Jesus who is a merciful judge, and the Holy Spirit who pleads our cause as a defense attorney.¹² Despite these misleading portrayals of Mary, Catholicism has rightfully emphasized Mary's faith and example as a model to imitate.

Many Protestants have challenged idolatrous approaches to Mary found in popular Catholicism. Protestantism recognizes that there is no mediator between God and humanity since this position belongs to Jesus Christ. Like the Apostle Peter, or the Apostle Paul, Mary would restrain anyone attempting to take away God's glory by worshiping her.¹³ Protestantism rightly recognizes that it is Mary's faith that makes her special in God's plan of salvation. When Catholics focus on the ontological status of Mary's Immaculate Conception, it seems to displace Mary from salvation history instead of recognizing her dependence upon God. Protestantism can ignore the importance of Mary by reacting against certain Catholic beliefs. Rather than seeing

¹⁰ One only has to scan websites concerning Mary's role as Mediatrix and co-Redeemer to recognize this misunderstanding by the Catholic faithful.

¹¹ Alphonsus Liguori, *The Glories of Mary*, Online Source: <http://www.catholictradition.org/Mary/glories8.htm>. Date Accessed: June 27, 2012.

¹² There are many Catholic jokes that express this view by portraying Mary as welcoming sinners in heaven's backdoor since Jesus or Peter prohibited them from entering heaven's front door.

¹³ Cf. Acts 10:26; 14:15.

Mary as additional dogmatic burden, Protestantism could learn from the Catholic devotion to the Holy Family. Mary and Joseph were the protectors and providers of Jesus for many years. Jesus continues to need our assistance and love especially in the child, the widow, the sick, and the poor; we can affirm God’s plan by following Mary’s example of faith and love. We can identify with Mary in the midst of loss and tragedy since a sword pierced her heart as she lost her son.¹⁴ Mary can function as an icon or an idol, but Catholics and Protestants might deepen their appreciation of the other’s beliefs. True Marian devotion always points to Jesus since it is iconic; any other Marian devotion is idolatrous.

The Episcopacy as an Icon and Idol

Having explored Mary and the sacraments, we now investigate the iconicity and the idolatry in church governance, particularly the episcopacy. Scholarly attention has been devoted to the development of the episcopacy from the New Testament times through the modern era. Rather than exploring the remarkable insights and often conflicting interpretations of scholars, we are more concerned with how the episcopacy functions rather than the objective content revealed in Scripture and Tradition.

Many Catholics readily admit that the episcopacy frequently acts in an idolatrous ways, but they would affirm the office of the episcopacy. Catholics continue to uphold the episcopal office because its failures do not necessitate its elimination. Anything can function as an idol including wealth, power, prestige, beauty, children, sports, and intellectual learning; the mere possibility of misuse or idolatry does not necessitate its rejection or its suppression. Even the bible can function in idolatrous ways, but this does not thereby discredit it. Catholics believe that the episcopacy guarantees the apostolicity of the church through the official teaching of the church and the continuation of the apostolic sacramental activity passed on by the imposition of hands. As an icon, the episcopacy reminds us of the countless martyrs who gave their lives in service to the Gospel. Countless bishops were martyred working as missionaries in new lands, while others died working for justice by those ignored by secular powers. Over the centuries many bishops selflessly dedicated themselves to Christ through their preaching, pastoral ministry, and holiness of life. Numerous people were converted by the teachings and lives of these bishops who directed others to Christ; such bishops truly “incarnated” Christ by making his presence known and felt.

¹⁴ Luke 2:35.

Many bishops failed to live the ideals entrusted to them by the apostolic ministry. Instead of making God's love visible to the faithful, countless bishops distorted God's Word and created scandal by their words and actions. Moreover, Catholicism since the Protestant Reformation has often over-exalted the role of bishops in church governance, especially concerning the papacy. The Bishop of Rome, the pope, is a disputed office due to the way it functioned in history and the manner by which the office developed. Since the Reformation, Catholics have often used Matthew 16:18 as the basis for understanding the role of the papacy; it is important to note that using this passage to defend the privileges of the papacy is a recent theological development. Thomas Aquinas, the great medieval theologian, does not use this biblical text to explain the teaching authority of the pope; instead Aquinas uses Luke 22:32 "which speaks of Jesus' prayer that Peter's *faith* may not fail."¹⁵ When Aquinas does use Matthew 16:18, it is in reference to Peter's confession and its content which is a common Protestant interpretation of this passage.¹⁶ The papacy and the bishops are subordinate to Scripture, for Aquinas, since they can only interpret, safeguard, and expound its content.¹⁷ Aquinas provides a balance between bishops possessing complete authority over the church at one extreme, and bishops lacking authority to provide guidance which would undermine the apostolicity of the Church. Aquinas bequeaths a test which protects the iconicity of the episcopacy and prevents it from acting idolatrously. In his *Disputed Questions on Truth*, Aquinas raises the objection that the apostle's successors act as intermediaries, therefore it is possible that they could be deceived or deceive others.¹⁸ Aquinas replies to this objection saying, "We believe the successors of the apostles and prophets only in so far as they tell us those things which the apostles and prophets have left in their writings."¹⁹ Bishops, as successor to the apostles, must explicate the deposit of faith contained in the Scriptures without adding or subtracting from its contents. The episcopal office, when it functions as an icon, bears witness to the faith by words and actions. When it functions as an idol, it focuses on its own power and prestige rather than living a life of humble Christian service.

¹⁵ Per Erik Persson, *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and Revelation in Aquinas*, trans. J. A. R Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 62.

¹⁶ Per Erik Persson, *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and Revelation in Aquinas*, trans. J. A. R Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 62.

¹⁷ Per Erik Persson, *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and Revelation in Aquinas*, trans. J. A. R Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 63.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas *Truth [De Veritate]*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), *Q.* 14, a. 10, obj. 11.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas *Truth [De Veritate]*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), *Q.* 14, a. 10, ad. 11.

Church governance has been widely contested among Protestants, with some denominations affirming the office of the episcopacy and others clearly rejecting episcopal governance. With such divergent practices found in Protestantism, it is difficult to make statements concerning the Protestant consensus on the episcopal office. In general, Protestantism distrusts the episcopacy since it seems to establish authority apart from Christ. Moreover, the episcopacy was widely abused throughout history; Protestants often fear bishops will impose false interpretations on the texts of Scripture. Protestant beliefs rightly oppose any attempts by the episcopacy to establish its authority apart from Christ. The function of the episcopacy finds its true essence when it functions as an icon by making Christ’s word and action come alive. The Catholic role of the episcopacy might challenge some Protestant denominations to reflect on their apostolic foundations. The modern world has confronted many ancient Christian beliefs such as the Virginal Birth of Jesus, the Resurrection, and the miracle accounts; these intellectual objections led many liberal Christian denominations to implicitly drop these beliefs. One might wonder how we should interpret the sacred texts in a way that recognizes the insights of modern scholarship while countering Enlightenment biases. Perhaps an iconic episcopal structure would provide a method whereby the apostolic faith could be maintained while recognizing authentic dogmatic development. The iconic role of the episcopacy would be subservient to Scripture, since bishops can propose no truths apart from God’s Word, all while providing a mechanism which guarantees apostolicity in the church. Protestantism has often neglected the iconic role of the episcopacy, while Catholicism has often forgotten how the episcopacy functioned throughout church history.

Conclusion

Since Vatican II, Catholics and Protestants have made much progress in their dialogues regarding these disputed theological issues. Besides merely understanding the Scriptural foundations and the subsequent theological tradition regarding these disputed topics, it is important to reflect on how these disputed topics were understood and misunderstood in their respective traditions. Both Catholics and Protestants are challenged to reflect on how Mary, the sacraments, and the episcopacy have functioned in terms of iconicity or idolatry. Recognizing how these beliefs function provides both parties with a further awareness of how the other’s beliefs can be authentically understood within their respective ecclesiastical tradition. Moreover, this method of reflection will counter idolatrous developments within one’s own

respective tradition. Finally, this kind of understanding promotes the pursuit of authentic Christian unity where suspicion is exchanged for understanding and love.

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