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BEYOND THE MATERIAL: TOWARD A PROPER UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGEMENT
WITH THE MATERIAL IN CHRISTIANITY

Upon entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the ancient church that houses the traditional sites of Christ's crucifixion, anointing, and burial, one is immediately met by the Stone of Anointing which marks the place of the anointing of Christ's body preceding his burial. It is a known fact, and not hidden (though undoubtedly unknown to many visitors) that this limestone slab was brought in and set in its present place in 1810 to replace the one destroyed in the fire in 1808, some seventeen centuries after the event of the anointing of Christ's body. In short, this stone is not the stone upon which Christ was anointed and furthermore, not all worshipers who come into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre recognize this. They often worship at the stone as though it were the actual stone upon which Christ's body once laid.

What, then, does one make of this? What does the devoted pilgrim make of this fact when they realize that this particular stone, though marking the traditional *site* of the anointing, holds not only no special power, but no special *place* in Christian history? What does the interested observer make of this fact when they observe the emotional worshiper pressing their rosary beads or prayer rope against this stone? What special place does this stone occupy, what place *should* it occupy, and what does it all mean?

Tracing a thread through Plato's realms and Forms, a renaissance of Aristotelian thought within Medieval Scholasticism, and the turn away from viewing nature through the metaphysical via the Nominalist movement of Roscelin of Compiègne and William of Ockham, I will lay a groundwork for the understanding the encounter of the transcendent through the material within

the Christian tradition by way of examining iconoclasm. This traced thread will be for the purpose of drawing an outline of historical Christian thought regarding veneration of material objects, and from there developing a proper understanding of veneration in relation to how the immaterial is reflected in the material, particularly in Eastern Orthodox and Catholic traditions.¹

Plato to Ockham: The Rise and Fall of Metaphysical Realism

The existence of a reality beyond the material is an ancient concept and one that does not originate with the Christian tradition. It is, rather, one that was adopted by Christianity, primarily inherited from the Jewish faith, but augmented and bolstered by Greek philosophical thought. One of the more fundamental and most enduring of Greek philosophical thoughts in this regard comes from Greek thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle. In Plato's cosmology, there are two realms: a realm of the visible material known as the "Realm of Becoming" which is subject to change and decay and a transcendental realm of the unchanging ideals of the material that he calls the "Realm of Being." Within this Realm of Being exist the Forms: unchanging, universal ideals which exist as the essence of the visible, the transcendental *ideal* which holds as its being all characteristics that the visible things possess. In his commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*, Francis Cornford summarizes Plato's thought in this regard when he says, "The chief point established in this prelude [of *Timaeus*] is that the visible world, of which an account is to be given, is a changing image or likeness (*eikon*) of an eternal model. It is a realm, not of being, but of becoming."² For Plato, then, material objects are shadows of the perfect Forms that exist transcendently beyond nature, beyond the material.

It is here that Plato's student, Aristotle, diverges from his teacher's metaphysical theory, though he retains the idea of the Universals, that is, the templates for the ideal and universally

1. For purposes of both scope and length allotted, this study will not take into account the sacramental aspect of material within these traditions, as the Sacraments are indeed held to be imbued with the supernatural and as imparting God's grace to the worshipper. This study is specifically focusing on the non-sacramental aspects of material veneration.

2. Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato* (London: Routledge, 2001), 23.

binding characteristics of material objects. While Plato considers the Universals to be *Universalia ante res* ("Universals *before* the thing;" that is, the Universals exist in an ideal form apart from and antecedent to the material, itself), Aristotle finds the Universals as existing within the material itself, *Universalia in rebus* (Universals *in* things). According to Aristotle, the properties of the material are intrinsic to the material itself and thus are shared with other objects of the same nature and therefore operate as Universals. Because of this, Aristotle would say, one need not look to an other-worldly source for positing what the nature of a thing is; one only needs to appeal to the empirical, to that which is observable as contained within all things of a similar nature. Aristotle departed from Plato's conception of the Forms and the realms of Becoming and Being to settle on a philosophy that identified the Universal as being one that is held within the material. What is a unifying theme between these two philosophies, however, is the idea that Universals, the abstract commonality that exists between objects of the same type, *do* exist in reality, and independent from what man may think or name them to be.

This understanding of a metaphysical reality as reflected in the physical realm is seen in steady succession in Christian thought from late antiquity throughout the middle ages, and in a wide array of application. For instance, Gregory of Nazianzus spoke of the presence of God "inherent in the created things he has brought forth and governs. All these indications of himself that he has left behind him are God's 'averted figure.'"³ Regarding another of the Cappadocian Fathers, Vasile Cristescu says, "We can trace similar opinions to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who writes that the form and the image reveal the substance and the substance is revealed by means of image."⁴ The presence of this metaphysical realism was present in the early Latin West as well in Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustine of Hippo.⁵ The Universals were

3. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 28," in *On God and Christ; St. Gregory of Nazianzus, The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, ed. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimirt's Seminary Press, 2002), 39.

4. Vasile Cristescu, "The Mutual Relationship Between Type and Prototype in Saint John Damascene's Teachings," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 6, 2 (2010), 51-67, 59.

5. *Ibid*, 58-59.

thus given continued life in the church and in developing medieval thought through theologians such as these, and then given rebirth in the high middle ages through Scholastic theologians such as St. Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and notably Thomas Aquinas who incorporated much of Aristotle's "categories" into his theology. These inheritors of Platonic, Neo-Platonic, and Aristotelian thought all still held to the metaphysical reality of all things, without the essence of things being dictated to them by an outside force (God excepting). For this reason, the great medieval theologians, particularly Nicholas of Cusa and Peter Lombard, saw creation as sacramental, in that it provides a visible representation of the divine reality.

However, in large part due to a reaction to the confusion and complications of Scholasticism and the debates that it entertained, a new understanding of metaphysics began to emerge, eventually called Nominalism. Contra Realism, Nominalism denied the existence of the Universals, whether they be Plato's *Universalia ante res* or Aristotle's *Universalia in rebus*. One can identify the nominalist view of the Universals as "*Universalia post rem*," that is, any Universal designation of essence to a thing only arrives *after* the thing is in existence; it is not intrinsic to the thing and not part of a grand scheme of Forms. A thing only receives its meaning after it is named.

It was within and through William of Ockham's (d. 1347) philosophy that nominalism began to take shape. With so many speculations regarding the world of the Forms and the many questions that arise from something of such a non-observable nature, Ockham, in his desire for simplicity, sliced through all of the hypothetical theory and confusing Scholastic debates (notably involving Duns Scotus, Peter Abelard, and Peter Lombard) and presented his view that only what is observable should be admitted. He argued that if something can be explained in a simpler way without resorting to the hypothetical or speculative, then this simpler explanation is to be preferred, particularly if it is empirically observable (hence, Ockham's Razor). From this,

Ockham posited, the reality is that which lies before us and is observable is the realm in which one must operate and that any nature or essence that an object has only comes from its being 'named' (Latin: *nomine*) by the human mind as man observes, experiences, and names the object and its essence.⁶ It is empirical; any universality of an object comes from the names that man give them and there is no higher, ultimate, or pre-existent reality behind them.

This new understanding of the natural sciences through the lens of Nominalism gained traction in evaluating science empirically apart from metaphysical realism, the spiritual nature of things began to wane in the public mind, and therefore any connection between the material and the heavenly likewise began to wane until the point where it was no longer understood in its context. With the rise of the natural sciences and the enlightenment, the use of the material in religion began to be viewed as superstitious at best or - especially in the second great iconoclasm of the Protestant Reformation - as idolatrous at worst. Coupled with the Enlightenment and an insistence upon the empirical study of nature, this led to a break between the material, natural world and that of the transcendent. Following Ockham's razor, the circle became complete: if the universe could be explained through observation and scientific explanation, then there was no need to move beyond that to hypothetical suppositions. It was not necessary that creation should point to a transcendent reality. The realms ceased to exist; Plato was dead.

The effect (and the empiricism of the method) became ubiquitous. This rejection of the metaphysical, transcendental realm continued through the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the Enlightenment and was disseminated into multiple realms of study that all, in their way, contributed to the thought of modern man, leading the modern world to only count on that which is empirically verifiable.

Iconoclasm: What's the Matter?

6. William of Ockham, *Ordinatio* I, d. 2, q. 8.

With the rise of the empirical, natural sciences and the Enlightenment, the use of the material in religion was viewed as superstitious at best or - especially in the second great iconoclasm of the Protestant Reformation - as idolatrous. Thus, we find in the Protestant Reformation and its rejection of the authority of the Catholic Church a related reaction against the material aspects of the Church as well. John Calvin, in his *Institutes*, gives a scathing polemic against the Roman Catholic Church and her images, paintings, crucifixes, and the like, levying accusations of idolatry.⁷ Ulrich Zwingli, one of the more radical of the Reformers, “was adamant that true religion could not admit any mediation through matter.”⁸ He launched iconoclastic attacks in Zurich, Switzerland in 1524 in which all art and musical instruments, crucifixes and communion vessels were stripped from places of worship. The flammable was burned, the metal was melted, and stone and glass were smashed. This iconoclast outbreak followed one instigated by one of Luther’s colleagues, Andreas Karlstadt, in Wittenberg in 1522. Religious zeal and iconoclastic fervor were spreading across Europe.

This, however, was not the first time that the Church had these charges laid against her. Though it originated from a different impetus, the iconoclasm of the Protestant Reformation was not the first iconoclast movement. In 726 CE, Leo III, Emperor of the Byzantine Empire, initiated what is commonly referred to as “The First Iconoclasm”⁹ with his edict forbidding veneration of images, particularly of representations of Christ and the saints (images of the cross were not prohibited). This iconoclasm was continued under his son, Constantine V, and was resolved (temporarily) at the Second Council of Nicaea (Seventh Ecumenical Council) in 787 with the twenty-two canons that resulted from the council.

7. Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 1, ch. 11.

8. Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 233.

9. The “Second Iconoclasm” took place from 814 to 842.

The works regarding the nature and use of icons, images, and other material during this time are of immeasurable value to understanding the Church's relationship – past and present – with the material. St John of Damascus, preeminent theologian and apologist for the use of icons during the Iconoclast controversy of the eighth century, states categorically in his *Treatise on Images*, "I do not worship matter, but I worship the god of the matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take his abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter."¹⁰ As the *iconoclasm* dealt primarily with the attack upon the material in the form of *icons*, it is this relationship, devotion to, and veneration of icons that will be addressed here, along with presenting a proper understanding of these beliefs and practices. In the defense of icons, there are three arguments that will be used. First, icon as scripturally valid; second, icon as book for the unlearned; and third, icon as window to the transcendent.

Icon as Valid

In this first case, the oldest argument is still the most pressing and enduring argument, being the one to which most iconophobes appeal today. The second of the Ten Commandments¹¹ seems to explicitly forbid creation of images:

Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not adore them, nor serve them (Exodus 20:3-5, NASB).

Many follow the interpretation that this exists as a prohibition to any created image in association with the Christian (or Jewish) religion and then proceed to condemn any practice relating to material presence in the practice of their religion. However, a careful and proper reading of the text, exegetically speaking, does not necessitate this conclusion. That this commandment was not

10. Solrunn Nes, *The Mystical Language of Icons* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 15.

11. As reckoned by most Protestants; it is part of the 1st in the Catholic tradition.

an express commandment forbidding the creation of “graven images” is obvious should one continue reading the book Exodus, for in just a few short chapters after this, the God of Israel directly commands the Children of Israel *to* build a box of wood, to overlay it in gold, and to create two images of heavenly creatures out of gold to place on the top of the ark. These are, by definition, graven images; they are that which God commands them not to build: “shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath.” If this command to build these does not consist in breaking the commandment, the intent of the commandment must lie elsewhere, and indeed it does. Another case of God commanding ‘a graven image of a thing that is in the earth beneath’ is the command of God to construct a bronze serpent in order to allow for the healing of the Jewish people after an unfortunate encounter with poisonous serpents (Num. 21:5-9). The Jewish leadership did not consider it antithetical to the first commandment to construct such an image. Again, the intent of the commandment lies elsewhere. Furthermore, the very house of worship of God contained carved images of flowers (Num. 8:4), fruit (1 Kg. 6:18), trees, oxen, lions, angels, and more (1 Kg. 7:18-30). The command, the *intent* is that Israel “shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3) while that which follows is an expression of that commandment: “You shall not worship them or serve them...” (v. 5). The first commandment in Exodus 20 was not a prohibition against images, but worship *of them*.

The great apologist for icons, John of Damascus, makes this same case in his *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*.¹² He describes the problem with making an image of God as lying within the fact that men had not seen the likeness of God as of yet, and because he had not taken form, “He also forbids the making of His image, stressing the fact that He is invisible. Neither the people nor even Moses saw any image of Him. They only heard His words. Not having seen God’s image,

12. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003).

they could not represent it.”¹³ But the Damascene immediately takes the precedent for images beyond the Old Testament and into the New Testament by making the connection with God as invisible, having no image in the Old Testament, with God as visible and *having* image in the New Testament in the person of Jesus Christ. He argues that once Christ appeared as “the very image [εἰκὼν; *icon*] of God” (Col. 1:15), the invisible, transcendent God was now made visible for men to observe and venerate in the material flesh. “This divine incarnation, the fact that God assumed human flesh, has sanctified both man and the entire terrestrial world...”¹⁴ and thus since man was now able to observe God in flesh, man was also allowed to preserve images of the prototypical image in the person of Jesus Christ. Iconography, he argued, began with Christ when God made Christ as an icon of himself.

This argument from the incarnation was appealed to not only by the 7th ecumenical council, but by earlier writers (John of Thessalonica, Germanus I of Constantinople) and more localized councils (Quinisext, 692) leading up to the great iconoclasm and its resolution.¹⁵ Using this argumentation, the preeminent discussion and resolution to the iconoclast controversy became a Christological one. Icons, then, were realized ultimately as a proper affirmation of the proper relationship between the spiritual and material and a proper Christology of spiritual and physical, met completely in the person of Jesus Christ who is both fully God and fully man. The main argument of the iconodules against the iconoclasm of the 8th century is that since Christ acts as the very icon of the Father, having taken material upon Himself, then there is precedent of approaching God through the sanctified material.

Icon as Book

Colleen McDannell notes that “The iconoclastic stream within Christian history has assumed that people who are illiterate or not properly trained in religion frequently mistake the

13. Leonide Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), 51.

14. *Ibid.*, 55.

15. Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, 147.

image of the divine for the divine itself."¹⁶ This concern was noted by Gregory Great (d. 604) who wrote to Serenus of Marseilles, an Iconoclast bishop, saying, "Not without reason has antiquity allowed the stories of saints to be painted in holy places. *And we indeed entirely praise thee for not allowing them to be adored, but we blame thee for breaking them.*"¹⁷ He continues,

For it is one thing to adore an image, it is quite another thing to learn from the appearance of a picture what we must adore. What books are to those who can read, that is a picture to the ignorant who look at it; in a picture, even the unlearned may see what example they should follow; in a picture they who know no letters may yet read. Hence, for barbarians especially a picture takes the place of a book."¹⁸

In this passage, Gregory deftly makes multiple points in favor of icons. First, the practice is one that has been done since antiquity, a powerful argument for a Church which so highly esteems Church Tradition and traditional practice. Secondly, Gregory correctly reflects the view of the Church in agreeing with the iconoclast that the images ought not to be adored, that is, worshipped. If they are in agreement, then this shows that the proper view of icons is not that they be held as objects of worship, and therefore the iconoclast is disarmed in their contention that these are idols. In addition, this points to the fact that the problem therefore lies not with the icon, but with the worshiper and with their catechesis, or training in the faith. If the stance of the church is that icons ought not be worshipped, and individuals are worshipping or promoting worship of an image, then that person is not operating in coordination with right teaching; this is the fault of the worshiper and not the icon, the Church, or the doctrine.

16. Colleen McDannel, *Material Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 10.

17. St. Gregory the Great, "Epistle IX," *Patrologia Latina* LXXVII (Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1844-55), 1027. Emphasis mine.

18. *Ibid.*

Furthermore, while McDannel notes that the illiterate and improperly trained may tend to worship the image, Gregory turns this argument on its head and addresses the proper use of the icon, stating that the icon itself actually serves *as* Scripture itself for the benefit of those ‘who are illiterate or not properly trained in religion.’ The proper use of the image, he argues, is that they be used to point to a greater reality beyond the material, that they be allowed and used in order to instruct the illiterate in the truths of Scripture through pictures in the same manner as Scripture would through writing. In fact, to this day, the painting of an icon is not referred to as “painting” an icon, but rather, *writing* an icon, and thus is held as superior to a mere image or painting. “For the Church, therefore, the icon is not an art illustrating Holy Scripture; it is a language which corresponds to Scripture, to the very contents of Scripture, to its meaning, just as do the liturgical texts.”¹⁹

Icon as Window

Finally, one of the more popular phrases that occurs among iconophile congregations is something akin to, “Icons are windows to heaven.”²⁰ For these, Christ in his incarnation was the ultimate icon, the prototype of iconography, itself. For he served as the greatest picture of the reality behind the visible. “He who has seen me has seen the Father,” Christ said (Jn. 14:9). It is on this basis that the iconodules saw fit to be able to create images of the transcendental reality that lay beyond the physical realm. Because Christ had come and given precedent as the image of the divine reality, men were allowed to view the material as being “windows into heaven.”

It must therefore be understood that the icon does not *contain* a transcendental presence of that which is represented and is not of the same nature of the prototype. This superstitious understanding of the icon was the misguided accusation of Byzantine Emperor Constantine V (son of the progenitor of the Byzantine Iconoclast movement, Leo III), the most antagonistic

19. Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, 167.

20. There even exists a book by the title, *Windows to Heaven: Introducing Icons to Protestants and Catholics* by Elizabeth Zelensky and Lela Gilbert (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005).

force behind the iconoclasm of the 8th century. He held that the Orthodox believed that an icon “must be of the same nature as the person it represents; it must be consubstantial with its model (ὁμοούσιον),”²¹ yet “for the Orthodox, not only was the icon not consubstantial with (ὁμοούσιον) or identical to (ταῦτὸ) its prototype... the very idea corresponding to the word ‘icon’ (εἰκὼν) implies an essential difference between the image and its prototype.”²² John of Damascus makes it very clear that “the representation is something different from that which is represented.”²³ Rather, hearkening back to Plato’s metaphysical realism, the immaterial is reflected in material as Eastern Orthodox iconology sees the “image as a means of ascent to the image’s prototype.”²⁴ The icon, the image, the *material* is not the object of worship, but is used in recognition of the transcendental truth beyond the material.

Worth noting is the great pains that the Church (Catholic and Orthodox, united as one church before 1054) has undertaken to ensure 1) a proper understanding of the nature of icons and 2) a proper reverence due to them that does not cross the line into idolatry. Though some may unjustly see fit to call what they observe and do not understand, idolatry, “Saint Basil the Great, Saint John Chrysostom, Origen, Saint Hilarius of Pictavia... and others indicate that the image reproduces only the exterior appearance and not the invisible attributes of the represented object.”²⁵ This belief is not only expressed in the ancient Fathers on the front lines of theological discourse, but even among the silent pious in more recent times. During the bombing of Siena in WWII, a crucifix that was sculpted by Lando di Piero in 1337 was shattered. Found inside was a note written by di Piero which ended with the following:

21. *Ibid.*, 148-149

22. *Ibid.*, 149.

23. St. John Damascene, “Third Treatise,” in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. by J.P. Migne, Vol. 94 (Paris: Bibliotheca Cleri Universae, 1862), 1337.

24. Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 64.

25. Vasile Cristescu, “The Mutual Relationship Between Type and Prototype in Saint John Damascene’s Teachings on the Veneration of Icons,” *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2010, Vol. 6, No. 2, 51-67, 56.

The Year of Our Lord 1337, January, this figure was completed in the likeness of Jesus Christ Crucified, true and living Son of God. And one should venerate Him and not this wood.²⁶

Here di Piero, living within what many would consider the most superstitious of Roman Catholic times, makes as astute a statement as any of the great theologians in the history of the Church: the material object is not to be worshiped, but God alone. We therefore see that the material icon is not divine, it does not contain the object of worship, and it is not the object of worship. It is merely a physical representation of a transcendent reality, and *that* transcendent reality is the object of worship (if God) or veneration (if a saint).

Conclusion

Despite the care with which the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches have proceeded in their delineation of proper attitude and relationship with images, a discomfort often remains among those who do not understand the practice. It is possible that, like the accusation applied by McDannell to the early medieval worshiper, perhaps *we* have not been properly catechized. Eliade describes our current predicament, saying, “religious man deeply desires *to be*, to participate in *reality*...” yet “desacralization pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious man of modern societies and that, in consequence, he finds it increasingly difficult to rediscover the existential dimensions of religious man in the archaic societies.”²⁷ This ‘desacralized man’ is not merely a secular man; many modern Christians, particularly of the Protestant heritage, choose to live a desacralized existence and thereby cannot understand or appreciate the experience of those who continue to live in a neo-medieval model that still retains the sacramentality of the material. Robert Maniura describes this uneasiness that persists

26. Robert Maniura and Rupert Shepherd, *Presence: The Inherence of the Prototype within Images and Other Objects* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 48.

27. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 13.

in many minds regarding the presence of the material in Christian worship saying, “There has been a lingering concern that the degree of likeness can be too close for comfort. Is the icon a mere sign or something more? What is the relationship between the icon and its prototype? ...A kiss is appropriate to a person. But why kiss an object? To treat the icon as if it were a person has long been viewed with suspicion in a religious context.”²⁸

Therein lies both the problem and the solution. A kiss *is* appropriate to a person, and this no one will deny. “But why kiss an object?” The problem lies in our perception that the kiss is given to the object and not to the person, when it is indeed directed appropriately to the real person that lies behind the icon, beyond the material. The solution lies immediately at hand: to recognize this truth. We must not be unjust in our dealing, inequitable in our interpretation of their practice, but we must recognize it for what it is. It is as if they kiss the face of God or the hand of the saint. We may not agree with the practice and it may not be comfortable for us to participate in it, but we don’t have to agree; we must simply at least begin to understand rightly.

To return to the beginning of our examination, let us realize that the Christian should have no problem with the ideals behind the material, the Forms behind the *eikon*. It is agreed that when God created the universe, he created both a material and spiritual realm and that the material realm is a porous realm to the spiritual. Furthermore, that God interacts with the material realm and operates in relationship to his followers through material means is ubiquitous in the biblical text. God appears in theophanies in a physical manner: to Moses, God took the form of fire in the burning bush. He appeared to various Patriarchs as a man or an “Angel of the Lord.” Upon the institution of the Mosaic Covenant and Law, God commissioned an entire cadre of material objects to be created to use in the cultus of Hebrew temple worship,

28. Robert Maniura, “Icon (Image),” in *Key Terms in Material Religion*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 113.

even with graven images of both earthly and heavenly creatures. And then, in the ultimate act of spiritual meeting the physical, the Divine himself empties himself (κένωσις) and takes the form of man,²⁹ being “the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature,”³⁰ and “becoming the very “image [*icon*] of the invisible God.”³¹ While engaged with man as physical man, Jesus repeatedly mediated grace to men through the material, reaching its height in the institution of the Eucharistic meal at the Last Supper.

Jesus touched the leper as he healed him. He announced his message to “him who has ears.” He accepted the veneration of the woman who poured out her fragrant perfume on his feet. He broke bread saying, “Take, eat.” He was presented and seen by men with the words, “Behold, the Man.”

Touch, listen, smell, taste, see; Christianity is material through and through. And through the material, we might perhaps behold the man and in him, behold God.

29. Phil. 2:7.

30. Heb. 1:3

31. Col. 1:15, “ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου.”