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IF THESE WALLS COULD ONLY SPEAK: ICONS AS VEHICLES OF DIVINE SPEECH

Terence Cuneo

This essay is in the philosophy of Christian liturgy. Specifically, it explores the liturgical practice, at home in the Eastern Orthodox Church, of venerating icons, asking: What is it about the liturgical role of icons that would make behavior such as touching and kissing them appropriate? After arguing that the standard answers to this question offered by Western and Eastern Christians are inadequate, I develop an account according to which the icons are instruments of divine action. More exactly, I claim that they are vehicles of divine discourse. The behavior exhibited toward icons on the part of Eastern Christians, I maintain, makes excellent sense on the assumption that they are responses to speech acts performed by God by way of God's appropriating the art of the church.

"For the silent painting speaks on these walls,
and does much good"

—*Gregory of Nyssa*

In both their private and corporate worship, Eastern Orthodox Christians do all sorts of things with icons: they adorn them with flowers, process with them held aloft, bless them with water, prostrate themselves before them, and touch and kiss them. What is more, Orthodox Christians behave in this way toward a wide variety of types of icons. They engage in more or less the same behavior toward icons that depict particular saints, such as Isaac of Syria, and those that depict particular events, such as Christ's baptism in the Jordan. In the eyes of many Western Christians, such behavior appears very strange. What is it about icons that would make such behavior appropriate? Or to state the question somewhat more precisely: Given the Christian East's insistence that icons play their proper role in the context of the liturgical life of the church, what is it about the liturgical role of icons that would make such behavior as touching and kissing them appropriate?

Two rather different proposals have enjoyed currency in the church's reflections on this matter. On the one hand, there is the understanding of the role of icons dominant in the (non-iconoclastic) Christian West. Gregory the Great articulates this view in a well-known passage, writing that "to adore a picture is one thing, but to learn through the story of a picture



what is to be adored is another. For what writing presents to readers, this a picture presents to the unlearned who behold, since in it even the ignorant see what they ought to follow; in it the illiterate read."¹ Gregory's claim is that icons primarily serve a didactic purpose: they are pictorial texts for the illiterate.

On the other hand, there is the rather different understanding of the role of icons dominant in the Christian East. According to this view, icons are not primarily pictorial texts for the illiterate, but quasi-sacramental mediators of divine presence. To express this mystery, Eastern Christians resort to metaphors, claiming that icons are "windows to heaven," "visible images of mysterious and supernatural visions," as St. Dionysius the Aeropagite puts it.² Through these windows, that which is depicted is said to become "spiritually present to us."³

Neither of these approaches is likely to strike someone interested in the liturgical *ratio* of icons as particularly satisfying. The problem with the first approach is that it is too minimalist in character. Were icons primarily didactic in purpose, it would be hard to see why for nearly two millennia Christians have done such things as prostrate themselves before them, touching and kissing them. More importantly, the Gregorian view (as we might call it) fails to account for the passionate insistence on the part of the Christian East that iconoclasm is an attack not merely on a particular mode of Christian worship, but on the very substance of the Christian faith itself. In his reflections on images, Luther admitted that icons could function as a memorial or commemoration. In so doing, he identified one of their liturgical functions, also identified by John of Damascus in his defense of icons in *On the Divine Images*. Still, were the liturgical function of icons primarily one of commemoration—at least in the sense that Luther appears to have had in mind—this would not explain why the Christian East has insisted that the very essence of the faith was at stake in the struggle with the iconoclasts. To destroy or deny the legitimacy of a memorial is no light matter. But it is difficult to see why it would be tantamount to eviscerating the content of the Christian faith, as the East claimed.

But if the Western position is too thin, the Eastern view is likely to strike us as extravagant. In what way could an image make Isaac of Syria present to us? In general, the suggestion that a pictorial depiction of a thing makes that thing present looks like an invocation of magic. Perhaps even more worrisome is the fact, alluded to earlier, that so many icons depict not particular persons, but events such as Christ's crucifixion. Everyone agrees, however, that were events such as this to have taken place, then they are

¹Quoted in Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), p. 47.

²Quoted in Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1996), p. 65.

³*Iconostasis*, p. 69. The claim is made in nearly every theological treatment of the Eastern view of icons of which I know. By calling this the dominant view in the East, I do not wish to suggest that Eastern thinkers have not employed other models regarding the liturgical role of icons.

over with. If so, one wonders how an icon could in any interesting sense make them present to us. When used to describe icons that depict events such as Christ's crucifixion, metaphors of being present, being a window to heaven, and being a visible image of a supernatural visions seem inapt. Or if not inapt, these metaphors leave us with deep questions about how to understand them in a way that their use is both illuminating and intelligible.

Texts for the illiterate or mediators of divine presence: neither suggestion sheds much light on the liturgical role of images. Neither offers a satisfactory theoretical model for understanding their appropriate role in the liturgical worship of the church. Can we do better?

I believe so. The key to identifying the liturgical function of icons, or so I shall suggest, is to understand them as vehicles of divine action, indeed, of divine speech. Understanding icons as vehicles of divine action, I shall further suggest, can help make sense of the language of presence so frequently appealed to by Eastern Christians. Between action and presence we needn't choose. Before I lay out my case for this view, however, let me preface what follows with three remarks.

The first remark concerns the relevance of our topic. I shall assume without argument that not only religious beliefs, but also many of the practices in which religious believers engage, including their liturgical practices, deserve the attention of philosophers. Still, it might be tempting to believe that the topic of the liturgical role of icons is of interest only to Christians of the East—or at least only to those interested in the practices of the Christian East. I believe that this is not so. In his excellent book *Worship: Its Theology and Practice*, the Swiss Reformed theologian Jean Jacques Von Allmen notes that among the great traditions of Christendom, the Reformation traditions alone have rejected the use of images in worship and, at that, not consistently. It is time, Von Allmen argues, for those who belong to the traditions of the Reformation to think hard about how the sense of sight can be redeemed in Christian worship and whether icons might play some role in this project.⁴ If Von Allmen is right about this—and I think he is—the question I wish to pursue in this paper is one in which the wider Christian community should have a stake. It is not one only for those interested in the Eastern church.

The second remark I wish to make concerns the type of model that I shall present regarding the liturgical role of icons. The model is one that, so far as I know, has not been explicitly defended by Eastern theologians, but is both informed by and consonant with the main lines of reflection

⁴Jean Jacques Von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 276ff. Jaroslov Pelikan, *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), chap. 4, expands upon this theme of the sanctification of sight, arguing that the defense of images marks an epistemological shift in Christianity in which the modality of sight is given a role at least as important as that of hearing.

in the East on the liturgical role of icons.⁵ Call it an “expanded” Orthodox view, if you like. Accordingly, it is a model that takes seriously the East’s insistence that icons are mediators of divine presence. However, as I’ve already noted, central to my argument is the claim that we needn’t choose between thinking of icons primarily as mediators of divine presence, on the one hand, or vehicles of divine action, on the other. Indeed, thinking of icons as vehicles of action, I argue, allows us to shed light on the claim that they are vehicles of presence.

The final remark I wish to make concerns talk—talk to this point in which I have freely engaged—about the liturgical function of icons. Talk of this sort can suggest that icons have one liturgical function and that our task is to identify it. I do not, however, believe that icons have a single liturgical function. Icons have multiple liturgical functions. Still, some of their functions are arguably more central than others, in part because they unify and make sense of other liturgical functions that icons play. So, in what follows, when I speak of the liturgical function of icons, I wish to identify a central liturgical function of icons that makes good sense of the ways in which Christian believers interact with them in worship.

I. Salvific Events

In a striking passage from his book *Liturgy and Tradition*, the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann writes the following regarding Christian faith:

the faith which founds the Church and by which she lives is not a mere assent to “doctrine,” but her living relation to certain events: the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, his ascension into heaven, the descent of the holy Spirit on the “last and great day” of Pentecost—a relationship which makes her a constant “witness” and “participant” of these events, of their saving, redeeming, life-giving and life-transfiguring reality. She has indeed no other experience but the experience of these events; no other life but the “new life” they always generate and communicate.⁶

If Schmemmann is right, Christian faith is not mere assent to a class of propositions or, for that matter, trust in a person. It is also a living relation to certain *events*, primarily, says Schmemmann, the founding events of the church, which include the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It is events such as these to which the church is called not only to bear witness, but also to participate in and experience as a source of life-giving reality.

In one sense, what Schmemmann says here seems profoundly correct. The events to which Schmemmann refers enjoy a certain type of primacy in the life of the church. A fundamental role of the writings and hymnody

⁵I use the term “theologian” here and elsewhere in a wider sense than that used in the Christian East.

⁶Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1981), p. 54.

of the church is to bear witness to them; the church bears a living relation not primarily to the media that witness to them, such as scripture and hymnody, but to the events themselves. That said, there is another sense in which what Schmemmann says raises questions of its own. Schmemmann writes that the church witnesses to various events in its history, allowing its members to participate in them. If this is right, then presumably the church does not wish its witness to these events to consist in mere commemoration. It intends for its members in some sense to participate in them. But how could we, who are thousands of years removed from these founding events of the church, become participants in them, thereby allowing them to communicate to us “new life”?

I shall turn my attention to this question in the last section of this essay. For the time being, however, let me use Schmemmann’s observation regarding the centrality of events in the faith of the church to throw light on the topic I wish to explore. Earlier I said it is difficult to miss the fact that so many icons depict not particular figures, but events fundamental in the history of the church. Indeed, it is difficult to miss the fact that the so-called festal icons of the church depict not particular figures, but the very events to which Schmemmann refers. Suppose, to keep our topic manageable, we limit our attention to such event-depicting icons, as we may call them.⁷ I want to suggest that Schmemmann’s reflections allow us to reframe the issue we are exploring, bringing it into sharper focus.

Central to the East’s reflection on the liturgical role of icons, I have noted, is the claim that they are mediators of divine presence. But if what Schmemmann says is correct, they are not just that. For the art of the church also purports to bear witness to the founding events of the church, inviting us to become participants in them. If so, we now have three interlocking ideas about the liturgical role of icons with which to work. Event-depicting icons are at once witnesses to divine action in the world, mediators of divine presence, and occasions for participation in the founding events of the church. My project in what follows is to unpack these three themes, arguing that they allow us to make progress with our leading question about the liturgical *ratio* of icons. Indeed, I shall suggest that these three themes are more closely connected than they might seem at first glance. If we understand the ways in which icons are a witness, then we shall also understand how they are both mediators of divine presence and invitations to the living relation of which Schmemmann speaks.

To this let me add the following observation: if the Christian East is correct, both scripture and the art of the church bear witness to its founding events. The Eastern church, however, has never viewed event-depicting icons as midrashic commentary on scripture. The role of these icons is not, as it were, to put scripture into pictures. Rather, generally speaking, icons of this sort purport to represent the *same content* as scripture,

⁷Among the class of event-depicting icons, I shall have my eye exclusively on those that purport to represent past events and not those that purport to depict future events, such as the Last Judgment.

albeit in a different medium and with different interpretive emphases.⁸ Scripture and icons are, according to this view, different ways of expressing or getting at the same thing. If this is right, icons and scripture do not have fundamentally different purposes. (Indeed, we should not miss the fact that the Christian East speaks not of painting, but of *writing* icons.) This suggests that if we understand how it is that scripture functions as a witness, then we shall also understand how icons do the same. In this next section, I shall pursue the parallel between these two instruments of witness.

II. Witness

Having spent fifteen chapters exploring the notion of divine speech, Nicholas Wolterstorff, in the Afterword to his book *Divine Discourse*, raises the issue of what reason there is to believe that scripture is actually a medium of divine discourse.⁹ Wolterstorff notes that the dominant type of rationale offered for this claim within the broadly Protestant tradition, found in both Calvin and Barth, is a-historical. Scripture, according to such views, is self-authenticating or authenticated by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. On its own, Wolterstorff contends, this type of approach will not work. Any plausible justification of the claim that scripture is an instrument of divine speech will have to proceed historically, taking into account the historical pedigree of the text. However, when one does proceed historically, Wolterstorff suggests, a pattern of justification emerges. The pattern is one that proceeds from divine authorization to divine appropriation.

The divine authorization consists in a chain of authorization-conferring events. The initial event is one in which the apostles are deputized by God the Father through Christ to be witnesses to and representatives of Christ and his salvific work. What emerges from this commission is a body of apostolic teaching and practice, which incorporates what Jesus taught them and what they remember of Jesus' ministry, all of which is formulated under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Substantial parts of this body of teaching is, over a period of time, then incorporated not only into the church's worship, but also into a series of books and letters composed by the apostles or their close associates—the apostolicity of these texts lying in the fact that they express the mind of those commissioned to be witnesses to Christ. The final link in the chain of authorization is the process of canonization, wherein the church designates that a single text, Holy Scripture, is divinely authorized.

The book that emerges from this process of canonization is, in the mind of the church, the word of God. But how is it that the writings of Luke,

⁸The exception to the identity-in-content claim is those icons that depict events not recorded in scripture, such as the dormition of the Theotokos. The identity-in-content-claim is, I believe, best understood to be a claim about what Wolterstorff, in *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), calls *designative content*. Two claims that purport to represent some event have the same designative content just in case they designate or refer to the same event.

⁹Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), chap. 16.

John, and Paul have this status? How can it be that scripture is an instrument of divine speech? The answer that Wolterstorff offers is this: it cannot simply be because their writings are inspired by God. Nor can it merely lie in the fact that in these writings God reveals God's will to humanity. For it is perfectly possible for something to be inspired by someone and yet not count as his word. Likewise, it is possible for something to reveal something about someone without its being the case that that thing is a case of that person's speech. So what brings it about that the scriptural texts are God's word, God's speech to humanity?

Simplified somewhat, Wolterstorff's suggestion is that the writings of Luke, John, and Paul count as divine speech because God appropriates their writings as God's own.¹⁰ An analogy might help to understand the proposal: suppose you and I serve together on a school board. And suppose, in the context of a meeting, you enter a motion. I agree heartily with the content of this motion and second it. In so doing, I have made your speech act my own. I have appropriated your speech. In much the same way, Wolterstorff contends, God appropriates the discourse of those God has commissioned to speak, thereby making their discourse God's own. Scripture is a case in which one person speaks by way of the speech acts performed by another. To use Wolterstorff's terminology, it is a case of double-agency discourse.

The position just articulated is a blend of the old and the new. By insisting that the books that belong to the scriptural canon must be apostolic, the position is identical with that defended by the ancient church, including the church of the East. By offering a model of what brings it about that the apostolic writings count as divine speech, however, the position goes beyond anything explicitly said by the church Fathers. Nonetheless, as I shall suggest in a moment, I believe it to be a natural extension of what the Fathers say and, perhaps, what they would've said had they reflected on the matter using the conceptuality of speech acts.

At any rate, according to the view we're exploring, scripture is a witness to the founding events of the church. The witness, if Schmemmann is correct, is the church's. But it is not only the church's. It is also God's. In a large range of cases, by both authorizing and appropriating the speech of the apostles, God vouches for the historicity of these events, calls attention to their centrality in salvation history, and communicates God's present intentions toward humanity. In this double-agency witness, one sees a theme deep in the theological reflection of the East rising to the surface. For fundamental to the Eastern view is the conviction that, at its best, the divine-human interaction is a *synergos* or a synergy between God's will and work and ours. The synergy between the divine will and the human, according to the church, is present most explicitly in the person of Christ.

¹⁰Wolterstorff himself distinguishes between deputized discourse, cases in which one person is authorized to speak for another, and appropriated discourse, cases in which one person appropriates the discourse of another. Here I emphasize the latter sort of double-agency discourse.

It is also present in that process that the church calls salvation, the aim of which is to become participants in the divine life. Finally, if the model that Wolterstorff proposes is correct, the synergy is also present in the message of the scriptural texts, as it is also the joint product of human and divine speech. *Synergoi* of the word, both incarnate and written.

The witness of scripture, according to the model that we've been exploring, consists (at least in part) in the fact that it is a text both authorized and appropriated by God. Let me now move to the second part of the parallel I am pursuing, which concerns the art of the church. Over and again, in their struggle with the iconoclasts, the church Fathers speak of icons as witnesses to God's salvific work. What is the character of their witness? The Seventh Ecumenical Council states the matter thus:

To make our confession short, we keep unchanged all the ecclesiastical traditions handed down to us, whether in writing or verbally, one of which is the making of pictorial representations, agreeable to the history of the preaching of the Gospel, a tradition useful in many respects, but especially in this, that so the incarnation of the Word of God is shown forth as real and not merely fantastic. . . .

We, therefore, following . . . the authority of our Holy Fathers and the . . . Holy Spirit . . . define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic of other fit materials should be set forth in the holy churches of God. . . . For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honourable reverence, not indeed that true worship of faith which pertains alone to the divine nature; but to these, as to the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross and to the Book of the Gospels. . . .

Thus we follow Paul, who spake in Christ, and the whole divine Apostolic company and the holy Fathers, holding fast to the traditions which we have received.¹¹

The argument of this passage comes in two layers. In the first layer, the authors of the council maintain that the icons of the church are, first and foremost, vehicles by which the church witnesses to the incarnation. What makes them legitimate vehicles of witness? They are apostolic; they express the mind of the church and, in particular, of "Paul, who spake in Christ." But why think that the icons genuinely have this status of being legitimate apostolic witnesses to the incarnation? Here we come to the second layer of the argument, which is an argument from the liturgical practices of the church. No Christian, the authors of the council claim, denies the legitimacy of displaying both the cross and the Gospels. And no Christian denies that it is appropriate to show great reverence toward them by, among other things, touching and kissing them. These practices

¹¹Seventh Ecumenical Council. I quote from the translation in the Christian Classics Ethereal Library at www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.toc.html.

also express the mind of the apostles; if not explicitly taught by the apostles, they are actions that the apostles would have instructed us to perform were they aware of our situation. But if so, how could one legitimately treat objects such as the cross and the Gospels with great reverence and not the images of Christ and his salvific work? "Why do you worship the book and spit upon the picture?" asked John of Damascus. Since the content of the icons and scripture is identical, John continues, "if the one is worthy of honor, the other is worthy of honor also."¹²

By pressing these points about the practices of the church, the authors of the council took themselves to be on firm polemical ground. For they were well aware that arguments similar to these had won the day in the first council of Nicea over four hundred years earlier. When unable to settle the issue of Christ's divinity by appeal to the writings of the apostles alone, the response was to look at how the apostles had taught the followers of Christ to pray. The followers of Christ, the architects of the first Nicean council pointed out, are to pray in the name of the Trinity. Were Christ not divine, the argument continued, this practice would be bizarre. Why would we pray in the name of the one true God and also in the name of two other created sub-deities? Were Christ a creature, to pray as the apostles had taught would be idolatrous. Such idolatry would be unacceptable, however, especially were it to come from the mouths of the apostles. The best explanation of why the apostles instructed us to pray in this way—so the argument continues—is that they assumed that Christ himself is divine in the same manner as the Father.

Let us now take the argument a further step. John of Damascus writes that the icons are "not our gods, but are like books which lie open in the churches in the sight of all." These visual books are helpful, for "all of us alike, whether learned or uneducated, benefit from what is painted in the icons. What the written word proclaims through letters, iconography proclaims and presents through colors." Lightly admonishing his readers, John continues, "now use your mind with precision. It is not I who am speaking, but the Holy Spirit who declares plainly through the holy apostle Paul, 'God spoke of old in various ways to our fathers by the prophets.'" To which John then adds this point of emphasis: "note that God spoke *in many and various ways*."¹³ The implication that John wishes his readers to appreciate is clear: do not be surprised by the fact that God speaks in many and various ways. Do not, furthermore, be surprised that God speaks through the art of the church as well as through the Gospels themselves. For, once again, if these two media genuinely express the

¹²Quoted in Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christianity* (University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 131. Later, I'll indicate why John's argument goes through only if one adds several other assumptions, including the claim that the content of both types of text is presented with the same illocutionary force. Perhaps it is also worth adding that I do not interpret John to claim that because icons and scripture share the same content, they thereby have the same authoritative status in the church.

¹³*Three Treatises on the Divine Images* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 2003), pp. 44 and 54.

same content, it is difficult to see how one could at once maintain that God speaks through the one but not the other.

Had we not explored how it might be that the scriptural texts are instruments of divine speech, John's suggestion that icons are also media of divine discourse might have seemed baffling. How could a work of art count as a case of divine speech? But at this point, we can see how to expand upon John's observation. Suppose that agents can perform speech acts not only by writing and speaking sentences, but also by composing works of visual art. Suppose, further, that the church's use of icons, like the writing and the canonization of scripture, has been not only guided by the work of the Holy Spirit, but also divinely authorized in virtue of its apostolicity. Suppose, finally, that by both authorizing and guiding the composition of the icons these works of art have been appropriated by God as a vehicle by which God expresses God's intentions with respect to humanity. (We might think of the Spirit's act of guidance functioning like a divine signature, appropriating a speech act that has been divinely authorized). By appropriating these works, God does such things as vouch for the historicity of the events they depict, draw attention to their centrality in salvation history, and communicate God's present intentions toward humanity. If we assume these things, then the parallel between the Gospels and icons that both the authors of the seventh ecumenical council and John of Damascus wish to emphasize is close. Both media function as witnesses to divine action in the world—and this in a twofold sense: both media are the product of those authorized to witness or testify to Christ's salvific work. Moreover, both media themselves represent events central to the life of the church as having certain features, thereby testifying to their occurrence. If the model that we have been exploring is correct, then God appropriates what is said by way of the composition of these works. This is what renders them the book and the art of the church.

III. Presence

Few of us communicate by hand-written letters these days. For better or worse, electronic media have won the day. But most of us know what it is like to receive a hand-written letter from a friend, spouse, or loved one. The shapes of the letters on the page, the phrases and idioms used, as well as what is said all bear the marks of the author. They express his or her person. Art is often similar. The materials and colors used, the use of space and, more broadly, the choice of what to present in a work of art also bear the mark of the artist. They, too, express his or her person. When the author or artist is no longer alive, often his or her writings or works of art are the closest thing we have to being with that person. Such is the degree to which these media can express who we are.

Several times now I have drawn attention to the Christian East's claim that icons are mediators of divine presence, raising the question of what this claim could amount to. I would like to suggest that the answer to this question is now before us. The key is to understand the ways in which

icons mediate divine presence along the lines of how a letter communicates the intentions of its author.

Letters are vehicles of communication. By performing the action of writing a series of sentences, an author thereby performs speech acts of various kinds such as asserting that one thing is the case, asking about something else, and promising to act in a certain way. These speech or illocutionary acts are not produced haphazardly. It is in virtue of having illocutionary act intentions of various kinds that an author performs them. Of course we are all familiar with cases in which an agent's illocutionary act intentions fail to correspond to the speech act performed. Jane means to praise another's work but inadvertently voices criticism. We are also familiar with cases in which an author's illocutionary act intentions no longer represent her considered opinion, as when a person changes her mind about what she said earlier about someone else's work. Still, when all goes well, the two correspond. In these cases, when an author intends to assert that the Rocky Mountains are magnificent, she succeeds in asserting this about the Rocky Mountains. When all goes well, then, there is a perfectly straightforward sense in which a letter expresses the intentions of its author. For by authoring this letter she thereby expresses her illocutionary act intentions with regard to her audience. And when all goes well, these intentions are manifest to her audience. They are, to use an equivalent idiom, present to her audience. The letter, in this way, is a vehicle of presence.

Let us return once again to the claim that icons are mediators of divine presence, keeping in mind the appropriation model of speech with which we have been working. By composing an icon according to the conventions of icon writing, what does its creator wish to communicate? The question raises complexities. Consider the person who composes (or "writes") a particular copy of Christ's baptism in the Jordan. In so composing this icon, that person may have no illocutionary act intentions whatsoever. She may be simply engaging in an exercise of copying one thing from another, thereby honing some of her artistic skills. Or she may compose the icon simply because she enjoys creating fairly abstract art. And indeed something similar may be true of the person who composed the original icon from which this particular icon is copied. It is possible that in depicting, say, Christ's baptism in the Jordan, he did not intend to claim that Christ was baptized at all. And yet I've claimed that it's the church's view that icons are vehicles of speech. If so, then illocutionary act intentions must somehow be operative if an icon is to testify to this event. But whose intentions?

Well, suppose that over time a system of composing icons emerged that had many features similar to that of a natural language: certain colors are used to represent particular attributes of persons represented, particular artistic tropes are used to help the viewer recognize where the event depicted took place, certain symbols are used to communicate that a depicted person who bears them has a particular standing such as being a

martyr, certain acronyms and monograms are used to identify particular figures, and so forth. Call this *the communication system* of icons. Suppose, furthermore, that this communication system is a component of the wider social practice of writing icons, a social practice in which only certain people are appointed to write icons, only certain materials are used to compose them, and only certain media are employed to display them. This social practice evolves and is fluid. For example, some who work within the practice add new emphases to established patterns of using the communication system; others introduce entirely new elements to the communication system. Although there is a tight connection between elements of the communication system and that which they communicate, there is, however, nothing like a one-to-one correspondence between them. The system can be employed by competent participants in the social practice in various and creative ways to communicate different things. The same thing can be represented in different ways and the same elements of the system can communicate different things. Given this fluidity, when we examine an icon, how are we to determine how the communication system is being used?

In principle, there are several available answers to this question. Without arguing for the position here, let me simply remark that appeal to something akin to authorial or speech act intentions appears unavoidable at this point.¹⁴ To determine how an element of the communication system is employed in the composition of a given icon, we need to know something about how the person employing it intended it to be used. But this leads us back to our initial question: Whose intentions?

The answer, I suggest, lies in distinguishing the composer of an icon from its author. Those who compose icons are the practitioners of iconography, those who engage in the social practice of composing icons, employing what I've called the practice's communication system. The author of an icon, by contrast, is the one to whose intentions we must appeal in order to determine how the composer's employment of the communication system should be interpreted (on the assumption, of course, that it admits of a determinate interpretation). According to the Christian East, the church is the author of its icons. If this is right, the intentions of the church have not only formed and informed the social practice of iconography; they also determine how these texts should be read. Obviously, we touch here upon deep and controversial issues about whether there can be collective intentions and how we should understand them. But suppose for argument's sake that there can be.¹⁵ Then the position of the East is evident: when the East claims that icons are the art of the church, at least part of what is meant is that the church is the author of these pictorial texts.

¹⁴A more full defense of the issue in play can be found in Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, chap. 11; and Noël Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992).

¹⁵For a defense, see Gregory Mellema, *Collective Responsibility* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997).

What should now be added is that, if the appropriation model is correct, the church is not the only author of these texts. For fundamental to a position such as that defended by John of Damascus is that icons are vehicles of divine speech. If so, God uses them as instruments of speech. The appropriation model tells us how this might be so: God appropriates the intentions of their author—in this case, those of the church—to communicate various things to humanity. If so, then the icons of the church also express God's communicative intentions toward us. Here we have double-agency discourse once again. Indeed, we have dual authorship as well. The icons have dual authors, both human and divine.¹⁶

Let me now tie this together. At the outset of this section, I suggested that there is a perfectly intelligible sense in which a letter makes its author present to us. Inasmuch as that letter is a vehicle of that author's illocutionary act intentions, it not only informs us about them, it also expresses these intentions, making them (when all goes well) manifest to us. It is in this sense that a letter is a vehicle or mediator of presence. The Eastern Church's puzzling claim that icons are mediators of divine presence, I am now suggesting, should be understood along similar lines. For suppose the appropriation model is correct, and icons are vehicles of their author's illocutionary act intentions. Their primary author, if I have interpreted the main line of thought in the Christian East correctly, is the church. Still, God appropriates what the church says via its art, thereby also becoming its author. If so, the art of the church expresses God's illocutionary act intentions to us, their audience. Icons are mediators of divine presence, then, in the sense that they mediate God's illocutionary act intentions toward humanity. Or more exactly, in some cases, they are the mediators of God's *present* standing illocutionary act intentions with respect to humanity. The presence in question also has a temporal dimension.

To this line of argument let me add a caveat. I have said that we ought to think of the way in which icons communicate divine presence along the model of the way in which a letter communicates the intentions of its author. By saying this, however, I do not mean to offer a view that provides an exhaustive account of the manner in which an icon communicates divine presence. I mean only to draw attention to one, albeit a central, way in which an icon might do this. For all that I've argued, there are other ways in which icons communicate modes of divine presence that prove to

¹⁶The dual authorship of icons and scripture opens up various possibilities regarding the nature of divine speech, among which are these: suppose we distinguish an agent's intention to perform an illocutionary action of a given type, such as asserting, from her intention to perform an illocutionary act of a certain type that has a particular meaning or noematic content, such as *that the Rocky Mountains are magnificent*. According to the appropriation model, when God appropriates human speech, at least two things could occur. First, God could appropriate both the human author's intention to perform an illocutionary act of a particular type and the noematic content that that agent intended to express by the performance of that act. Second, God could appropriate the intention to perform an illocutionary act type, but not the noematic content that that agent intended to express by the performance of that act. In this case, by appropriating illocutionary act intentions, God performs an illocutionary act of the same type performed by its human author, but endows it with a new meaning.

be much more difficult to elucidate in any sort of philosophically articulate way. That said, I do understand the dimension of presence on which I've had my eye to be robust. Sometimes—think once again about cases in which one is separated from another whom one loves—a vehicle of another's intentions, such as a letter, is the most vivid way by which he or she can be present to one.

IV. Participation

At the outset of his defense of images, John of Damascus writes that "things which have already taken place are remembered by means of images. . . . These images are of two kinds: either they are words written in books . . . or else they are material images, such as the jar of manna, or Aaron's staff, which were to be kept in the ark as a memorial."¹⁷ Icons, John continues, belong to the second category. They are memorials. But they are memorials of a curious sort. For their role is not merely to testify to what has occurred, but also to gesture toward what is to come. Odd as it may sound, because they depict what has occurred in certain ways, icons are memorials that point in multiple temporal directions. Paying attention to this feature of iconography, I now want to suggest, will help us to unpack the last of the three themes I wish to explore, which is the claim that icons are means by which one can participate in the events they depict.

To get our bearings with respect to this issue, let us return once more to the idea that event-depicting icons function as a witness. The witness consists in the fact that icons of this sort accurately represent events central in the life and history of the church. But it does not wholly consist in this. One can, after all, accurately represent an actual event but not thereby intend to testify to its historicity. In books of historical fiction, for example, authors often depict actual events but make no claims about whether they actually occurred. Rather, by representing these events, an author invites his audience to consider or imagine them as part of a larger fictional world that is projected by the text. If the East is correct, however, icons do not function like the propositions presented in a text of historical fiction (although, as I shall point out in a moment, there are similarities to appreciate). Rather, in a large range of cases, in depicting an event in a certain way, the author of an icon wishes to vouch for the fact that the event depicted actually occurred. To employ the idiom of speech acts, in depicting an event in a certain way, the author of an icon thereby intends to assert or *testify* that that event has actually occurred and has many of the properties that it is depicted as having.

Suppose, then, we pair the commemorative function of icons with assertive illocutionary act intentions: by pictorially depicting an event, the (human) author of an icon thereby asserts, testifies, or witnesses to the fact that that event has actually occurred and has properties of various sorts. If the appropriation model of speech is correct, these assertoric speech inten-

¹⁷Three Treatises on the Divine Images, p. 21.

tions are also ones that God expresses toward us by appropriating the art of the church. A moment ago, however, I pointed out that icons have the distinction of at once pointing in multiple temporal directions. Their function is not simply to testify to what has occurred, but also to gesture toward what shall occur. Consider, in this regard, an icon of the Last Supper that depicts Christ surrounded by his apostles. In one sense, this icon is supposed to be historically accurate, for it purports to depict an event that actually occurred. But, in another, it takes considerable liberties with the history, for this icon does not endeavor to depict Christ and the apostles at the Last Supper as they actually appeared. Rather, faces are elongated, mouths are closed, eyes are enlarged, nimbuses are introduced, and perspective is inverted. And yet this icon is not badly executed realist art! Rather, the emphases and distortions are used to present the figures depicted in the icon as transfigured. The icon depicts Christ as he appeared to the apostles later in the upper room and the apostles as they appeared to each other on Pentecost, brimming with light. Echoing a theme deep in the liturgical life of the East, the commemoration of a past event contains within itself anticipations of a future one.¹⁸

So, there is a sense in which event-depicting icons testify not only to what has occurred, but also to what shall occur. But here the significance of the Christian church's claim that we are all called to be disciples of Christ should not be lost from view. The depiction of the disciples not as they were but as they would become is both an invitation and a promise. The invitation is to become as the disciples were to become: bearers of the divine light who are transfigured by their interactions with Christ. Icons invite us to imagine what this might be like. The promise is that transformation indeed shall occur if the invitation is accepted. If icons do indeed point in multiple temporal directions, we can render the idea that they are vehicles of divine presence still more concretely. In the art of the church, what are made present to us are God's illocutionary act intentions. These are intentions whereby God not only testifies to what has occurred, but also invites us to be transformed, promising that the transformation shall take place. By pairing the broadly eschatological dimension of icons with those illocutionary act intentions expressed by invitations and promises, we can come to a fuller view of the presence that icons are intended to communicate.

But what has any of this to do with our final task, which is to make sense of the idea that icons allow us to participate here and now in the events they depict? Well, suppose that icons do function to express a divine invitation and promise. Then there is certainly a sense in which by recognizing this invitation and promise, we can thereby presently participate in the reality of the events depicted. When reflecting on the church's

¹⁸Dozens of examples could be given from the church's hymnody. Here is the Troparian from Lazarus Saturday, which is also sung on the Sunday of Palms: "O Christ God, when you raised Lazarus from the dead before Your passion, You confirmed the universal resurrection. Like the children with palms of victory, we cry to You: O Destroyer of Death, Hosanna in the Highest! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!"

frequent use of the “liturgical present” — its use of the indexical term “today” in its hymnody—Schmemmann puts the matter like this:

To be sure, the Virgin does not give birth today, no one “factually” stands before Pilate, and as facts these events belong to the past. But *today* we can remember these facts and the Church is primarily the gift and the power of that remembrance which transforms facts of the past into eternally meaningful *events*.

Liturgical celebration is thus a re-entrance of the Church into the event, and this means not merely its “idea,” but its joy or sadness, its living and concrete reality. . . . We were not there in Bethany at the grave [of Lazarus] with the crying sisters. From the Gospel we only know *about* it. But it is in the Church’s celebration today that an historical fact becomes an event for us, for me, a power in my life, a memory, a joy.¹⁹

Distinguish, Schmemmann suggests, between an event and its significance. An event itself is a dated happening that, unlike a property or state of affairs, does not admit of multiple instantiations. There is no intelligible sense in which an event such as Christ’s baptism in the Jordan can reoccur. Nor is there any sense in which one can today literally be a participant in this event, for it has already occurred. By contrast, the significance of an event is a property that that event has. Roughly speaking, the significance of an event for a person is the import it has or should have for that person given his commitments, interests, or values. While there is no literal sense in which we can participate in a past event, we can presently “participate” in it inasmuch as we can presently allow its significance to shape our lives. To use language often appealed to by contemporary theologians, we can participate in an event inasmuch as we allow it to shape our narrative identity.

The point is worth expanding upon. Consider what Augustine does in his *Confessions*. An unmistakable feature of Augustine’s telling of his life-narrative is that it is couched in the language of the scriptures. Indeed, at various points, Augustine invites his audience to view events in his own life, such as his anguishing in the garden, as ones that parallel those in the Gospels. In doing so, Augustine makes the Gospel narrative his story; the Gospels provide the framework in which he understands the significance of the events that comprise his life. There is also, however, an unmistakable sense in which by appropriating aspects of the Gospel narrative, Augustine thereby expands this narrative itself, presenting his own life-story as an extension of it. This allows Augustine to situate his own life-narrative within a larger, more cosmic narrative of redemption that highlights the scope and power of the Gospel narrative itself. We could think of these two ways in which Augustine connects his life to the events of the Gospels as an inward and an outward movement: the inward movement is one in which Augustine appropriates the Gospel nar-

¹⁹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1969), pp. 82–83.

rative to illuminate events in his own life, while the outward movement is one in which Augustine situates his own story within a larger, more cosmic narrative. The point that is important for my purposes is that these two different ways in which Augustine connects his life with the Gospel narrative are ways in which he participates in the events depicted by the Gospels. To use the language from the passage quoted from Schmemmann earlier, they are two ways in which Augustine comes into a living relationship with these events.

In any case, if Schmemmann is correct, to participate in the founding events of the church is not, as some Orthodox theologians have suggested, to enter into a liturgical time machine in which the past mystically becomes present.²⁰ Rather, it is to do something very much like what Augustine does in writing his *Confessions*. It is to order one's life around the founding events of the church, taking stock today of the full significance of these events for us here and now. But it is also to view one's life as a part of a larger narrative, which includes the founding events of the church. It is to come into living relationship with these events by doing such things as celebrating them in the liturgical life of the church, living in expectation of further events they anticipate, and comporting one's life in recognition that they have transformed human history.

Understood thus, there is nothing particularly mysterious about the claim that icons are vehicles by which we participate in the founding events of the church. They are the visual means by which the church invites us to shape our narrative identities by connecting them in various ways with the founding events of the church. It may bear emphasizing that, if the appropriation model is correct, the invitation is issued not merely by the church, but also by God.

Let me add to this a final observation. In his reflections on faith, Schmemmann speaks both of participating in the founding events of the church and coming into living relation with them. I have offered an account of what he means by the first claim, thereby also dropping clues about what it would be to come into living relation with these events. What should now be added is that the art of the church can also be an occasion for coming into living relation not simply with the events they depict, but also with their author. As philosophers of art such as Noël Carroll have emphasized, when we engage with a work of art such as an icon, there is a sense in which we enter into a relationship with its author.²¹ For to genuinely engage with a piece of art is not simply to arrive at clever construals

²⁰For example, in his book *Time and Man* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1996), the Greek theologian Georgios Mantzaridis maintains that there is a unique dimension of time, which he calls liturgical time. In this dimension, we are "freed from the restraints of time." Whatever is repeated in time is "not confined to time but extends into eternity." "Liturgical time" not only "transcends time," but also "transfigures physical time and transports us from symbol to truth, from the transient to the eternal." So, in some sense that lies beyond understanding, in liturgical time, these events become present to us here and now, allowing us to participate in them.

²¹Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," pp. 118ff.

of its significance. Rather, it is to attempt to understand its author, discerning what he is trying to say by way of the creation or presentation of that work of art. This is surely a natural extension of what Schmemmann himself had in mind when he speaks of coming into living relation with the events that the art of the church depicts.

V. Conclusion

If you were to walk into a traditional service in the Dutch Reformed tradition you might find that immediately after the sermon, there is a long period of intentional silence. If you were to ask about the significance of this practice, someone knowledgeable would tell you that the people view the sermon as an occasion in which God speaks to the congregation. The silence is an expression of grateful acceptance of what has been proclaimed.²² To my knowledge, there is no similar practice in the Eastern church. Rather, at various points in the liturgy, Eastern Christians do such things as kiss a copy of the Gospel itself and prostrate themselves before icons. At the outset of our discussion I asked about such behavior: What is it about the liturgical role of icons that would render such behavior fitting or appropriate?

The answer I have offered to this question falls into two parts. The first part, which has occupied most of my attention, has been to identify the liturgical function of icons. Only if we understand this, I have assumed, can we begin to understand the behavior in which Orthodox Christians engage. Admittedly, the account of the liturgical role of icons I have offered is not general in character; it pertains only to the role of event-depicting icons.²³ Still, its main lines should be clear enough. According to this answer, icons are best viewed as vehicles of both divine action and presence. By appropriating the speech actions performed by the human authors of these texts, God does such things as vouch for the historicity and importance of the events these texts depict, invite us to be transformed by them, and promise that we shall see both redemption and transformation.

If this is right, however, the second part of the answer more or less falls out of the first. Eastern Christians prostrate themselves before icons, touching and kissing them for much the same reason that the Dutch Reformed keep silent after the sermon. It is their way—demonstrative by

²²In saying this, I don't wish to hazard a brutally empirical generalization. Rather, I wish to proffer what Gadamer would call a descriptive account of understanding. The behavior in question is what takes place when participants in the practice have grasped its *ratio*, conforming their behavior to it.

²³I believe, however, that the account can be naturally extended to apply to icons of other sorts. Very briefly, I would say this: first, many icons that we might not initially categorize as event-depicting actually are—think here of icons in which Christ raises his hand in blessing or judgment or when the Theotokos holds the Christ child. Second, as Orthodox thinkers such as Leonid Oupensky point out, icons of the saints are ones in which these individuals are presented as transfigured. What is presented in these images, then, is something like a point in a narrative: among other things, icons of this variety invite us to explore the details of that person's life that either led to or have been the result of such a transformation. See Oupensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1992).

Western European standards—of expressing gratitude toward the divine witness, invitation, and promise they communicate. To say this, admittedly, is not to settle the issue of whether such behavior is fitting. We are all aware of cases in which gratitude and affection are expressed in mawkish or inappropriate ways. That said, one needn't cast far to discover parallels to the ways in which Eastern Christians comport themselves with respect to icons. Visit a work of art such as Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial and you will find people doing such things as touching and kissing the names of fallen soldiers, etched in marble. Evidently, the touching and kissing are organic—indeed, uniquely human—responses that these people find that this work of art calls forth. Why should it be any different with the icons? By touching and kissing them, Eastern Christians find themselves expressing, in as fitting a way they know how, gratitude toward the extraordinary witness, invitation, and promise that the icons communicate. In doing so, they express gratitude, love, and laud toward the One who, if the church is correct, is their author.²⁴

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