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## *Oikonomia*, Incarnation and Immediacy: The Figure of the Jew in St John of Damascus

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1. What does it mean to allow human being to emerge as a locus of philosophical investigation? Any attempt to clarify this question is already to take up the concerns of a philosophical anthropology. From within the purview of this project a philosophical anthropology is that which address the question of the being of being human.<sup>1</sup> Its concerns therefore are ontological rather than simply ethnological. And yet, it should not be thought that the question is a novel one. Indeed, the contrary is the case. The contention here is that the history of philosophy is marked by the continual engagement with and attempt to answer that question. The undertaking of this paper, while it concedes the centrality of that address, approaches the concerns of a philosophical anthropology from within what can best be described as the space created by the overlap of the history of theology and the history of the image.<sup>2</sup> That space and its interconnected components are there to be recovered and transformed once the question of the being of being human is given as much an historical inflection as it is a philosophical one. This allows the historical to figure within the philosophical. Equally, it allows for a critical engagement that opens up the possibility for the reconfiguration of a philosophical anthropology.

Programmatically, therefore, such an approach entails that the locus of investigation has to have a specific setting. Recovery and transformation demand it. The set of texts that comprise that setting here are the three treatises written by St John of Damascus between 726 and the early 740s CE and are published as *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*. Three interrelated preliminary points guiding the approach taken here need to be identified. The first is to note that part of what has to be demonstrated within this regional concern is that any attempt to engage human being under the guise of a form of neutrality, as if there were just an open field, is there in name alone rather than being real. Neutrality remains a feint,

despite appearances. In other words, inclusion and exclusion, processes which would work to stem the possibility of neutrality, from the realm of the human not only have historical force, they present the philosophical with an ineliminable demand.

Secondly, one of the most persistent elements in any attempt to respond to the question of the being of being human posits a divide at the centre of human being. There are many examples. They may involve a divide in which the body is separated from the soul; or the animal (even human animal) from that which is properly human. As positions such as these are developed - and they will have internal contradictions and limits inscribed within them - other areas of concern are drawn into consideration. The one that is central here is the tradition in which the marker of human propriety is located in those unique elements which identify the specifically human by defining human perfectibility in relation to the identification of the human as that which is created in the 'image' and 'likeness' of God. Given this setting the question to be addressed concerns the meaning of 'image'.

Answering this question, from one perspective, occurs at the limit of religion, indeed both question and answer may resist any straightforward incorporation into the domain of the religious. What occurs within the question is the identification of an element of human being that is there in excess of mere bodily presence. To the extent that, for example, 'dignity' is present as an addition to simple empirical presence with the result that slavery can then be understood as the elimination of human dignity that still maintains the body as extant, it follows that the critique of slavery in the name of human dignity will have recourse to the very structure of thought which, while conceding an initial equation of human being with empirical presence, refuses any final reduction of one to the other. The important point here is that once this position is sanctioned what is then conceded is the presence of a form of doubling that marks the being of being human at the origin. Within the history of theology this position is initially formulated in *Genesis* 1.26-7. However, it is presented in such a way that what is set in play, at the same time, is the problem of the icon or the image. No one

element can be addressed without the recognition of this original interarticulation.

This founding position receives an important reformulation in *Genesis* 2.7 within which what can be described as the logic of breath has become operative: “Then *Adonai*, God, formed a human from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life so that he became the human living being”. Breath does not just animate matter; it is that which establishes a distinction between the body as an empirical entity and what is identified here as the ‘human living being’. The presence of this logic complicates the way self-presentation is to be understood.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, the problem introduced by *Genesis* 1.26 has a twofold quality. In the first instance it pertains to what the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ mean in both the context of Torah and associated literatures, then in their rearticulation, firstly in the Septuagint and then in the Greek of the Christian Bible.<sup>4</sup> In the second instance, the problem of the image becomes more emphatic once the concerns with the history of the image within the realm of art (or that which is positioned as art) are themselves confronted by the sense of actualization and presence that occurs with the claim that the figure of Christ is directly related to God. The presence of Christ is one resolution to the question of the status of the image. Moreover, once this setting is taken into consideration then Christology, itself unthinkable outside the logic of incarnation (i.e. not the ‘fact’ of incarnation, but the ensuing logic that secures it), rather than being an event within the history of religion, has to be understood as an event that ties together that history with both an accompanying concern with the icon/image and the continual engagement with a specific conception of a philosophical anthropology.<sup>5</sup> The latter, the continuity of engagement, has to follow insofar as what it means to be human - the being of being human - is defined here by a relation to God where this is an ontological consideration, and is present in the form of an image having actuality. The corollary of the Christological is of course that there cannot be a conception of God without an accompanying image. The question of human being is located, as a result, within that setting. While greater argumentation is

needed what this positioning of the human yields is the third point of orientation, namely the Christological as marking the advent of a founding set of relations. The effective presence of the Christological means that to the extent that there is a philosophical thinking of the human that is bound by the image then it is situated within this nexus.

The importance of this recognition is that what is then opened is the space for the *counter measure*. The *counter measure* is the interruption that stages an opening. However, it is neither arbitrary nor without content. In this instance, while retaining the possibility of thinking a philosophical anthropology premised on founding interarticulation in which the doubling within human still occurs, what is distanced is the subsequent position in which that doubling is taken to lead inexorably to the set up dominated by an imagistic conception of the image. Here what is interrupted therefore is the link between the already identified doubling and the actualization of the image as bound, a binding with its own necessity, to the Christological. The *counter measure* therefore opens the possibility that even though the founding doubling is retained, this occurs without there being the subsequent commitment to the incorporation of the image into a set of relations defined by both sight and immediacy. Integral to any undertakings that such an opening allows is the point noted at the outset concerning the impossibility of neutrality. (This will become the problem of the figure.) As a result there would be the possibility of a philosophical anthropology that was defined neither by the image nor, as will be suggested further, by immediacy. And, it will also be the case that the feint of neutrality in being exposed would then allow for the inscription of relationality, power and difference as components integral to the development of that anthropology. Central therefore to understanding how this initial setting works, and thus identifying that which yields the possibility of a *counter measure*, is the presence of a founding set of relations between God, the human and the image. (Relations that follow from the third point of orientation - i.e. the Christological - noted above.) The question therefore is how, in that particular context, is relationality to be understood? As will emerge that

conception of relationality is the problem of the economic, that is, the problem set in play by the use of the term *oikonomia*.<sup>6</sup>

The presence of a set of relations, always already interconnected relations - *oikonomia* - defined by modalities of sameness rather than identity, occurring between God, the human and the image has two important consequences. The development of a critical engagement with the conception of a philosophical anthropology emerging from these relations has to engage them. Engagement is the precondition for any subsequent reconfiguration. The first consequence is the creation of a set up in which a series of elements cohere. Within this setting there are important connections. There are, for example, significant points of contact between the cosmological and the anthropological. What is accomplished as part of this process is the development of a specific configuration of human being. This is the first point. Then secondly there is the creation of a figure. The figure - in this instance it will be the figure of the Jew - is a mode of human being whose existence is created in order that it then be excluded. (The creation of the figure undermines the possibility of any sense of assumed universality or neutrality within the detailed development of a philosophical anthropology.) There is the important additional point namely that this exclusion is itself fundamental to the maintenance of the identity of that from which the figure is constructed in order then to be excluded. Consequently, the argument would be that the identity in question depends upon the excluded figure. Moreover, there is an important consequence to the creation of a figure. It brings with it a division in the precise sense that the life of the figure is not coterminous with those whose 'lives' have been configured. In the case that is pertinent here what endures is the non-identity and thus the problem of the relation between the figure of the Jew and the lives of Jews. Figured being therefore is the construction of a form of existence that is always determined in advance of any one life. The figure creates and defines loci in which *counter measures* become possible. Understanding modes of figuration is essential to the analysis of the framework that incorporates the writings of John Damascene and the philosophical anthropology that it sustains, since they work through a

system in which *oikonomia* is inextricably bound up with creation of the figure of the Jew. Hence, it is a conception of the anthropological that is premised on a fundamental modality of exclusion. The analysis of this configuration has therefore an inescapable exigency.

2. As noted at the outset the following encounter with central elements of the defence of the image/icon in the writings of John Damascene is located in how the interplay between the anthropological and the history of the image yields a specific conception of the figure of the Jew. In his *De Fide Orthodoxa* in the section entitled significantly *On Man* Book 11. 12) while ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ reappear as qualities, what is important once relationality becomes the focus, is that the human is presented as already enclosed and as part of the world and thus as ‘a small world enclosed in a larger world’ (St John of Damascus, 1886). This reiteration of the microcosm/macrocosm relation sets in play the need to account for the already present relation between the worlds. Moreover, this structure is reiterated in terms of the connection between Christ and human being. Again, at stake here are both sameness and more importantly the immediacy of sameness. That immediacy is twofold. It is sameness as a relation without mediation, and secondly, it is a relation whose recognition (or observation) occurs immediately (i.e. occurring in the now of its happening). In other words, it is immediate because it is both without mediation and immediately there to be seen. In regards to the latter John Damascene argues in *De Fide Orthodoxa* that: “‘We’ attribute to Christ a human *energeia* because we perceive this economy in Christ”<sup>7</sup> (59.24). In general terms microcosm/macrocosm is a mode of relationality in which two conditions obtain. Firstly, there is a both a possibility - and thus an envisaged actuality - of relation between the human and Christ. Secondly, this possibility is there to be seen. Not only must there be the relation, the relation in being present to the subject, being a subject is then delimited by that seeing. To be therefore is to see within the presence of this economy. To see the relation’s presence is thus to have been inscribed within it. Consequently, the state of not seeing, or being deemed to be the one who

does not see, or, more emphatically not being able to see, creates the situation and thus the predicament of exclusion. The designation of being the one who does not see reinforces both the identity of the set of relations, equally the identities within it, and the continuity of the process of exclusion. As will become clear the Jew's figured presence is an effect of the mode of relationality that is envisaged. As has already been suggested relationality is named within the tradition by the term *oikonmoia*. As significantly the macrocosm/microcosm relation is an object observed by a subject. Hence the following questions: Who observes? The text is clear: 'we see' (θεωρουμεν). Hence the question: Who is the 'we' that perceives? The question of the 'we' is the question of how the being of being human is thought within such a context. In other words, the question - Who is the 'we'? - depends upon an immediacy that excludes figured Jews.

At work within the setting of this economy is the 'word' that has become flesh. (*John 1:14*) Rather than ask an abstract question - Is there a need to think the relation between word and image? - there has to be a more specific point of address. Certain formulations in the Christian Bible, here specifically *John 19:5*, mark the possibility of movement from word to human being and then to image. Indeed, there is a corresponding exigency. The words were clear Ἴδε ὁ ἄνθρωπος (*ecce homo*). The identification of Christ with human being, in which he is 'this man', has created the need to account for the very possibility of that movement. (A movement that is itself located within the development of a philosophical anthropology in the precise sense that what is named is human being as opposed to the divine.) As a result, it is the presence of Christ as a human being that creates thought's predicament. Understood philosophically the exchange between the iconoclasts and iconophiles exists as a consequence of that event. While there may appear to be parallels in other traditions, notably in Judaism and Islam, this is not the case. For example, the extensive forbidding of images even decorative ones that can be found in the commentary on *Exodus 20. 3-6* in *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* (the text itself was compiled mid-4<sup>th</sup> century CE) is contradicted both by reports of actual practices at the time though more importantly by the presence of artifacts in the synagogues of late



antiquity and the early modern period. Nonetheless, such a state of affairs cannot be interpreted as a clash between iconoclasts and iconophiles.<sup>8</sup> Simply put, they are indifferent to the incarnation. The general claim for which a detailed argument would need to be adduced is that the forbidding of images within Judaic thought is fundamentally different. For example, the interdiction announced in *Deuteronomy* 5:8, and which follows the identification of the problem of idolatry in *Deuteronomy* 4. 15-16, has to be read in the context created by *Deuteronomy* 4:8, in which the significance of the law as that which unifies a people and has a regulative force is advanced. The forbidding of images which is the refusal to identify God and thus the law with pure presence and thus immediacy occurs in a setting created by the primacy of the law as that which is there almost as a transcendental condition of human sociality and a locus of continual and thus mediated engagement. Within this setting, responding to the law is always mediate; while the response to the image is immediate. The final point to note is that is the difficulty of an identification of iconoclasm and its defense with acts of destruction as though acts of destruction could be generalized.<sup>9</sup> The predicament is importantly different. A predicament is the way in which the self-conception of the time of writing produces what is taken to be the task.<sup>10</sup>

The figure of the Jew located in the writings of St. John of Damascus, is located within and as part of that predicament. It is not just that 'seeing' and its connection to acts of 'veneration', a connection in which both cognitive and theological positions are incorporated within ritualistic processes, define the subject positions, that position is itself held in place by what is seen and thus warrants immediate veneration. The reciprocity here is fundamental.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is essential to begin with the staging of the predicament, then to note the way subject positions are created, then to trace the interconnection between 'theology' and 'economy' as it occurs in his writings. In regards to the latter reference to Theodore of Studion (759-826 CE) and Cyril of Alexandria (378-444CE) will be of singular importance precisely because they allow for a deeper understanding of the connection between the theological and the economic. All these elements

account both for the creation of the figure of the Jew as well as what that specific mode of figuration brings with it. In other words, they locate the figure within the predicament that accounts for its production.

A predicament, however, is not just the setting for an event. A predicament is a structure which is itself ideational and which makes thought possible. Informing any predicament is the time of its own occurrence, a predicament is self-temporalizing. At work within it therefore is a specific conception of time - what has already been referred to as the present conceived as the time of writing - that has itself a determining effect on what has become possible for thought. Note the following two passages from John Damascene's defense of images:

Of old, God the incorporeal and formless was never iconized but *now* that God has been seen in the flesh and has associated with human kind, I depict what I have seen of God. I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter. (TDI 29, SJD 89). (My emphasis).

For there is one God, one law given of the Old and New Testaments, who of old spoke in many and various ways to the fathers by the prophets and in the time of the eschaton by his only-begotten Son (TDI 83-4, SJD 73).

Present within these two passages is the question of time, the conditions in terms of which images/icons can be produced and the subject position that they then demand. The response to that demand that occurs here is 'veneration'. (And it should be noted that 'veneration' is not an option. It defines the object, more significantly however it delimits the state of being a subject.) As the first passage makes clear there is an interruption in time that charges the present with an intensity that had not been there hitherto. John writes, '*now* that God has been seen in the flesh' Hence, the conjecture here is that what is significant has two interrelated elements. In the first instance there is the force of the interruptive '*now*' The second is the intrusion into this setting of what can be described as a structure of immediacy. Seeing is the immediate action. While there may have been a coming to see at work and thus seeing is there as a process, in the line cited

above there is the affirmation of what can be described as the 'now' of having seen. Sight allows for the materiality of the object - the object presenting matter's creator - to be present. Presence here is presence to the eye (present to the eye) and thus an immediate presence.

What occurs in the second passage is a further description of the 'now'. Again it is essential to note the moves occurring prior to the evocation of this 'now'. In the case of this passage even though it opens with the a direct statement of both God's presence and quality, (the latter takes the following form '(f)or there is one God', a division still obtains. Firstly, there is the God who is present and who speaks of 'old' (speaking of course in the 'Old Testament') in 'many and varied ways'. After which, that is to say 'now', there is the God (the same identical God) who speaks with a single voice through the 'Son'. Speaking through the Son demands an immediacy of relation, which is present in terms of the immediacy of sameness. And here God's having been positioned as there, always already there, in relation to the Son means that firstly God's relation to the world has changed and thus the God of *Exodus* 31:18, the God who is described in *Talmud (Berakhot)*, as the 'giver of Torah' (*notein hatorah*) no longer obtains and that secondly what counts as the world has also been fundamentally altered (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 11b). Indeed, it is the world 'not in heaven' (*Deuteronomy*. 30:11) that the obligation and duties linked to law obtain.<sup>12</sup> 'Now' that world no longer obtains.

Part of the argument therefore is that within the *Torah* the giving of the law, its reception and any subsequent action all have an indeterminate relation to each other. 'Now' these modes of relationality no longer hold. Indetermination has become determination. Mediacy becomes immediacy. What obtained no longer holds 'now'; this is another time. It is this other time that accounts for the absolute radicality of one of the claims leading to John Damascene's evocation of *Galatians* 5:4. The claim in question is the unequivocal assertion that 'if you keep the law, Christ is no use to you' (TDI 71, SJD 106). To hold to the law, which means *not* to hold to the immediacy of the relation between Father and Son, is not just to retain the law; it also involves an exclusion from the 'us' and an identification of the law as literal

and thus as automatically binding. There is an addition and a simultaneous excision. Plurality and the need for interpretation, that which would be necessary were the law to be retained as necessary for 'us', and equally as constitutive of that 'us', even if what counts as constituted by that 'us' remains open and indeterminate, would have necessitated the presence of an original form of mediation. The latter have been overcome by the presence 'now' of a singular voice and the corresponding literalization of the law. 'Now', therefore, the problem of relationality is fundamentally different. 'Now', there is an overcoming in which God remains identical - it is still the 'one God' - even if the status of what is voiced, namely 'the said', is henceforth significantly different. The time of singularity, which is equally and simultaneously the overcoming of mediacy, is given a specific temporal designation. The singular and thus the immediate voice occurs 'in the time of the *eschaton*'. To reverse the formulation, the position is that without the Son, the word of God remains mere word (hence the 'problem' of the legalism or the nomism of the Jews). As such, time would still be at the 'beginning'.<sup>13</sup>

What this encounter with the time sets in place is the need to account for the nature of the relations that occur within it; occurring 'now' 'in the time of the *eschaton*. It is not just that what takes place here is the insistent presence of the Christological, it is more significantly that the Christological, understood as a set of relations, cannot be thought other than in connection both to the overcoming of mediacy in the name of immediacy and thus as generating as a question the nature of the immediate relation between the Father and the Son in the first instance and then 'veneration' in the second. God is 'venerable by nature' (TDI 104, SJD 135). Veneration is a mode of relationality and the designation of a subject position. It is the latter since to be a subject is to venerate that which is by nature venerable. Failure to venerate the failure to be a subject and thus to distance and refuse nature's own exigency. If God is indeed by his 'nature' an object of veneration then his veneration must be immediate. That immediacy demands, given the necessity of God's absence, his presence via a relation, namely his presence in and through the relation to the Son. What

is demanded by that which occurs ‘in the time of the *eschaton*’, i.e. the time of immediacy and sight, is the staging of hierarchical relations of sameness. That hierarchy is the economic.<sup>14</sup> The economic is integral to the production of the figure of the Jew. The stronger conjecture would be of course that this produces the Jew as figure to be excluded and that for the hierarchy to be effect and thus for the economy to continue to be operative that exclusion has to occur.

3. The problem of relation is the problem of the economic. In the *Second Refutation of the Iconoclasts*, Theodore of Studion draws an important distinction between the theological and the economic. The setting pertains to what counts as the object of ‘veneration’. In Theodore’s dialogical text the ‘Heretic’ suggests that it is God who must be venerated and not a ‘prototype’ let alone an ‘image’. In this setting the distinction between ‘prototype’ and ‘image’ is already significant. The ‘Orthodox’ response is clear: “We are not talking about theology, sir, in which there is no question of resemblance or likeness but about the economic in which the prototype and the copy are seen. You must admit that the word has become flesh and become like us”.<sup>15</sup>

What is the force of the distinction between the theological and the economic? It is clear from the start that the theological pertains to forms of separation and thus if the formulation can be reversed the economic pertains to ‘resemblance’ and ‘likeness’. (This is what was intimated earlier in terms of the distinction between identity and sameness. The terms ‘resemblance’ and ‘likeness’ name modalities of sameness.) However, before the question concerning the distinction between the theological and the economic can be addressed a second passage needs to be identified. In this instance it comes from Cyril of Alexandria. Fundamental to it, given that the economic involves a hierarchical set of relations, is its evocation of the Pauline position in which both the human and the figure of Christ appear as ‘taking the form of a slave’. After all, *Galatians* 1:10 involves its author in a self-description as a ‘slave of Christ’. In this context Cyril of

Alexandria wrote: “... to say that he took the form of a slave expresses in its entirety the mystery of the economy in the flesh” (Cyril of Alexandria 1886).

The use of the term ‘economy’ here is decisive. To which it should be added that Cyril also formulated this position at another point, this time in the second *Christological Dialogue*, maintaining the link to slavery, in terms of ‘the economy of incarnation (την της ενανθρωπησεως οικονομιαω) (Cyril of Alexandria 1886). In John Damascene slavery emerges in the description of ‘the first kind of veneration’ (TDI 104, SJD 135). To venerate is to be enslaved. The conjecture here is that what is significant is how the relation between slavery and the economic is understood. Indeed, the argument might be that one cannot be understood without the other. Being a subject and the economic are interarticulated. To go further, the claim would have to be that Mondzain’s position that theology is ‘believing without seeing’ while the economic is ‘believing while seeing’ is not simply true but had far greater implications than had been thought hitherto.<sup>16</sup> In the precise sense that belief has become central and that the link between belief and sight redefine the relation to God in terms of immediacy. Before returning to the slave as a position within a structure of immediate relationality, some further elaboration of *oikonomia* is necessary.

It is clear that the use of the term *oikonomia* and correlate terms in the Greek world pertains to the place that is regulated, modes of regulation and a hierarchy within the domain of the regulated.<sup>17</sup> All three are at work. It can be argued that one of the most significant precedents for this use can be found in Aristotle’s evocation, in the *Politics*, of the distinction between the political, whose subject position is identified initially as the *plethos*, and then, almost in contradistinction, there is the domain of the οίκος:

Yet it is clear that if the process of unification advances beyond a certain point, the city will not be a city at all for a city essentially consists of a multitude (*plethos*), and if its unification is carried beyond a certain point, city will be reduced to family (*oikia*) and family to individual. (Aristotle 1932, 1261. 19).

While many aspects of this formulation are important, in this instance what is significant is the mode of relationality and thus commonality that defines

the object of governance within the city, namely the ‘multitude (*plethos*)’.<sup>18</sup> The contention here is that these relations have to be explicated in terms of the centrality of deliberation and judgement. Decisions are contestable. Mediacy prevails. The opposite is the case in the *oikos*. In that instance decisions have a form of inevitability attached to them. Deliberation is redundant and the relation between the elements has an inescapable hierarchy. It is the latter that comes to define the sense of economy that prevails in opposition to the theological. Recalling the terminology that has been used thus far it can be argued that the contestable decision, a decision linked to processes of deliberation, demands the primacy of both mediation and temporal (and spatial) openness. A setting that stands against the immediacy of hierarchical relations within the ‘house’.

In *De Fide Orthodoxa* John Damascene will use the term *oikonomia* to describe the complexity of relation between the body and the soul. When taken together they comprise ‘the *oikonomia* of life/of what is alive’. (St. John of Damascus 1886, 59.21). Biological life and the life of the mind and, in the end, the life of the citizen are positioned within the economic. (There can no life - real life - outside it. Indeed there is no outside other than the one in which the figure is constrained to inhabit.) What will continue to insist within other uses of the term *oikonomia* is the primacy of relationality defined in terms of both sameness and obligation. Continuity will always displace a discontinuity demanding negotiation. For example, John Reumann has shown that the use of the term *oikonomia* in documents from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE described a will (in the sense of testament) with its own form of related covenant. In other words, that such documents projected a relation to the future. (Again the presence of the relation can be viewed as necessary even if the content and nature of the relations were left as open questions. The obligation was retained (Reumann1959, 282-292)). Reumann suggests in addition that ‘God’s ‘*oikonomia*’ also includes his plans for the last time’ (Reumann 1959, 291). The eschatological future therefore works within the structure of *oikonomia*. While it might seem a distinctly different sense of the term it is also linked to a form of

conciliation. However, the conciliatory involves the maintenance of the community. Hence in her examination of the term in the writings of Basil of Caesarea, Kathy Eden described *oikonomia* in his work in the following way: “*Oikonomia* entails making accommodation to the psychological needs of each individual believer in the service of a unified Christian community. Here as in Quintilian it subordinates the means to a greater end, a part to a whole” (Eden 1997, 44). The argument has to be that ‘accommodation’ is not the same as deliberation and that such a community in involving relations of sameness has had to incorporate the necessity of modes of exclusion and thus both the creation and the inscription of the figure.

4. In the *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* there is a discussion of what he identifies as the ‘sixth type of image/icon (εικονος). One instance of which is comprised of the words written in books or the law on tablets. In either case what matters is the way the process of *iconization* occurs. Here the text is clear ‘letters iconize the word’ (TDI, 27, SJD 86; TDI 99, SJD 129-30). What is there, words, letters and thus books, when taken as a totality are ‘seen by the sense of sight’. (TDI, 100, SJD 130). What is seen is there to be seen. What is important is the status of the letters. This is, of course, the question of the medium itself. The letters here would have the same status as the wood of the cross were both to function as an ends in themselves. John Damascene defends matter against the Manichean attack. However, the defense of matter has a specific quality. Hence the important claim made in the *First Treatise*:

I do not venerate matter I venerate the fashioner of matter who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from revering matter, through which my salvation was worked (TDI, 29, SJD 89).

Matter’s relation to God is what counts. (Matter is imbued with ‘grace’.) The subject’s relation to matter and thus to God is immediate. Immediate since what is excised is the medium - ‘I do not venerate matter’. There is an economy of relation and an economy proper to each of the relata. The



position attributed to matter, in which letters on tablets and in books are the law's restated presence, are fundamental to the creation of the figure.

In both the *First* and the *Third Treatise* the Jew is positioned in reference to Leontius of Neapolis's *Treatise against the Jews*. In the first instance the charge against the Jew pertains to a false accusation, on their part, of Christian idolatry. The passage in question is the following:

If you accuse me again O Jew, saying that I venerate the wood of the cross as God, why do you not accuse Jacob of bowing in veneration over the head of his staff? But it is clear that in honouring the wood he did not venerate it, but venerated Joseph through the wood, just as we [venerate] Christ through the cross but do not glorify the wood (TDI 49, SJD 156).

Later in the *Third Treatise* in a florilegium containing Leontius's words the critique of icons is described as having been advanced by those who 'speak/prattle unjustly'. The additional point is that such critiques are advanced by a 'tradition' that is defined by a relation to 'the law'. He then adds, in connection to this tradition, and thus to a definition given to it by the law, 'it is not ours' (TDI 130, SJD 178). (What is 'ours' is the domain of the 'we'; the 'we' who see. Thus it is not the affirmation of place but the creation of place as a locus of inclusion and exclusion.)

These are complex and demanding passages. Were it just material, the 'cross' as mere wood, then, the argument would be that the Christians were indeed idolatrous. That the 'cross' is not mere wood is because of its incorporation within a logic of relationality (i.e. within an economy). More significantly the cross becomes necessary because it is 'through the cross', that veneration is possible. The complexity emerges because John Damascene takes the Jews to be arguing that the 'wood of the cross' stands for God and therefore that both God and that which stands in relation to God can be thought outside the confines of this already structured economy. The separation would mean that matter could only ever be symbolic. The important point is that it would be as though there were a mediate relation between matter and God. A mediate relation does not just stand opposed to immediacy it stands opposed to both the immediacy of

seeing and thus the subject position that is created for and sustained by that immediacy. Again, at stake here is the subject who sees. Exclusion and inclusion, components integral to the creation of the figure - recall the use of the pronouns 'we', 'ours' - cannot be separated from sight and immediacy.

If seeing is primary and occurs within an economy structured and demanded by the actuality of the incarnation, itself the process *par excellence* of actualization - this is, after all, what it means to be in 'the time of the eschaton' - then what is deemed to stand counter to this is blindness, the refusal to see and thus the disavowal of that economy itself. However, these positions are created. They are figures. They construct the figure of the Jew. The *counter measure* therefore is not their refusal. In other words, it is not the rejection of the charge of blindness, legalism, nomism, etc. in the name of its op-posite. As though the creation of a *counter measure* were simply a matter of counter positing. What stands counter to immediacy is an insistence on the mediate, on distance, and thus on interpretation. What, in fact, counters the temporality of immediacy is the temporality of deliberation and the potential infinitude of the contestable decision. If there is a term that names this temporality then it is *reading*.<sup>19</sup> Reading allows for the creation of a different subject position and enjoins another sense of the material, one in which the book is not given within the process of its own 'iconization' and therefore is held apart from its presence as an image. Moreover, breaking the link to the image will not just be true of the book or of letters, it is equally true of the subject and thus of the equation of human being with that which can be given in an image. This position falls beyond the purview of iconoclasm (and thus of its assumed opposite, namely iconophilia.). The claim is rather that what such a positioning of human being opens up is the possibility of a philosophical anthropology that occurs beyond the hold of a specular oscillation between the positions of the iconodule/iconophile and the iconoclast. The suspension of this oscillation would allow an-other return to *Genesis 2.7*. With that return the claim would then be that the addition, that which allowed for a distinction to be drawn between mere life, which would be, for example,

the life of the slave, on the one hand and 'the living human being' on the other was no longer defined by the image. Rather, the recognition of that addition's fragility would give rise to the need for its protection. The name given to the form that protection would take would be the law. The law would allow the suspension of figured being. Hence, what would then need to be argued is that rather than a concern with the problem of the image - and the question of the possibility of its being thought beyond the economy that delimited incarnation - the real opening that was there within any philosophical anthropology was an incorporation of the law, where law was understood as that which was regulative within the placedness of the being of being human, i.e. regulative within place understood as the always already present locus of human sociality. This links the anthropological and the theological. It does so, however, in terms that work to reposition a philosophical anthropology by bringing into relation with a political theology.

Finally, therefore, what matters is the law. However it is not the law that is excised in order for the economy of the incarnation to be maintained. Rather it is a conception of law that always stands at a distance from immediacy. It is therefore the conception of law whose determination is given by the demand for justice. As a result there is the iconoclasm that continues to clear a space for law, allowing for a clearing as a locus of deliberation, a clearing taking on the quality of what Arendt might have understood by the 'space of appearance', clears away the image as the locus of immediacy and identification.<sup>20</sup> The *counter measure* yields therefore a domain in which what figures is the possibility of deliberation and contestation between citizens whose identity is given by an original form of relationality rather than the creation of figures to be excluded. This is the other economy, the economy of original mediacy.

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<sup>2</sup> While it cannot be pursued here it should nonetheless be noted that even the evocation of the term ‘image’ raises a number of genuine problems. For example Philostratus’ (200-230 CE) major text is the *Εικονες*, though it is known by its Latin name *Imagines*, and can be taken to concern the relation between *ekphrasis* and the ‘plastic arts’. In St John of Damascus while the term ‘image’ occurs in the translation what is often at stake is the icon or the process of iconization. The question of the image is posed thus: *ti esti eikón?* (TDI 95, SJD 125). References to St John of Damascus are to St John of Damascus 2003, 1975, (henceforth TDI and SJD). Even if the complication that emerge with German term *Bild* are ignored, it is still unclear that it is possible to evoke the term ‘image’ as though it were simply neutral. In fact the contrary is the case, terms such as ‘image’ are already located within a network of relations. Their analysis cannot ignore that initial setting.

<sup>3</sup> While it cannot be taken up here it needs to be noted that there is another version or permutation of the logic of breath that appears in the evocation of the *katechon* in *2 Thessalonians*. Note the following:

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming. *2 Thessalonians 2:8*

Pursuing the varying permutations of the presence of ‘breath’ and thus the complexities within the logic of breath is an important task to be taken up in another context.

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<sup>4</sup> For an important discussion of the *imitatio dei* within the Jewish theological and philosophical tradition see Yair Lorberbaum 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Hence the claim by Dimitis Pallis 2015, 173. The Christological is often overlooked as forming an integral part of philosophical positions that while having overcome what might be called the God of epistemology, though often this is no more than simple disavowal, retains the Christological as a structuring force. That this is the case in Hegel has been argued with great cogency by Emilio Brito. See Brito 1983.

<sup>6</sup> The term *oikonomia* names a set of hierarchical relations. It is also the term that plays a central role within any thinking, in this period at the very least, of the incarnation. While his work goes in a slightly different the writings of Emmanuel Alloa 2013a, 2013b have been decisive for the formulation of this paper.

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of the position of *oikonomia* in John of Damascus see Andrew Louth 2002, 144-179.

<sup>8</sup> *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael* 2004, 321-322.

<sup>9</sup> Though this is the challenge presented by Jaś Elsner 2017.

<sup>10</sup> I have used the term ‘predicament’ in a similar fashion to analyze the way Hannah Arendt understands the demands that the historical context makes on thought. The reciprocity between context and thought endures as fundamental. See Benjamin 2016b, 2017a.

<sup>11</sup> On the role of the cognitive in John Damascene see James R. Payton 1996.

<sup>12</sup> While the question of how this conception of world is to be understood cannot be approached directly here an important beginning can be found in Berkovits 2010.



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<sup>13</sup> The same formulation - ‘in the time of the *eschaton*’ - can also be found in the *De Fide Orthodoxa* 56.53. Indeed the formulation occurs 10 times in Jean Damascene. In the *Christian Bible* it occurs twice though with different connotations in Epistle of Jude, 1 Peter I.1.20.

<sup>14</sup> Alain Besançon, in his extensive study of iconoclasm, also notes in regard to ‘the Damascene’ the inscription of the ‘image’ within a hierarchy. See Besançon 2009, 127.

<sup>15</sup> St Theodore the Studite. (1981,1866. Reference here is to page 353 of the latter.

<sup>16</sup> See the discussion of this distinction in Marie-José Mondzain 1996.

<sup>17</sup> It is also has a specific usage within Byzantine cannon law in which it, as has already been suggested pertains to a sense of compromise. Equally it is linked to a notion of management. However, the question of management has to be interpreted here in terms of relationality. For a general discussion of some of the issues raised by the term see: John E. Erickson 1997.

<sup>18</sup> The problem of the *plethos* or multitude as the both sovereign and the locus of governance gives rise to a range of important philosophical issues. Michael Dillon has argued that the ‘advent of Justice and the possibility of politics arise only because that *plethos* is ineradicable’. See Dillon 1999, 157. While Daniela Cammack 2013 has problematized the automatic extension that the term might be given.

<sup>19</sup> On the complex relation between the immediacy of seeing and the mediacy of reading see, Benjamin 2016, 2017b.

<sup>20</sup> This is a key term for. It is defined in Arendt thus:

The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized. See Arendt 1958, 199.