

Picturing Bodies: Sacred Images and Transformative Practice in Byzantium and Tibet

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore briefly the way in which iconic representations of divine embodiment serve analogous and yet distinct purposes in different traditions. In the Byzantine East, images of the glorified body of Christ and the saints prefigure the deification of the practitioners that will be accomplished at the end of time. For the Tibetan master Bokar Rinpoche, the mental visualization of the Tantric deity Chenrezig enables one to retrieve the nirvanic dimension of one's body, which is usually obfuscated by ignorance and emotion. The comparison illumines the tradition's different conceptions of temporality, individuality, and soteriology.

In his *First Refutation of the Iconoclasts*, Theodore the Studite (759-826) addresses the vexed question of the legitimacy of the veneration of icons, which during the eighth and ninth century was the object of severe critiques coming from defenders of a more "intellectual" approach to Christian practice (St. Theodore 1981).³⁰

In this work, the great Byzantine author and mystic, famous for his extensive writings on the spiritual life and his role in the reorganization of monastic life, outlines and defends the propedeutic value of iconic representation of Christ and the saints, pointing to the deep relationship between the mystery of the hypostatic union and the deification of the individual, and indicating that icons portray the eschatological destiny of the individual. In this perspective, the icons of the incarnate Word and his mother, as well as the images of the saints, remind one that the event of the incarnation embraces and redeems the whole of humanity, both in its spiritual and its bodily dimension.

In the Buddhist tradition of Tibet, one may also find extensive literature on religious imagery and their role in spiritual practice. Within Vajrayāna Buddhism, the Yogacara tradition on the three different levels of reality, building on the Madhyamaka distinction between conventional and ultimate truth, serves as template for a

³⁰ From the declarations of the Council of Hiera (754), one sees that iconoclast theology was characterized by a general mistrust for the concrete and the material, echoing Origenist positions that continued to enjoy a certain degree of popularity despite their condemnation in the mid 6th century. See John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir Seminary's Press, 1997), Ch. 3, 6. 20

sophisticated speculative reflection on the different embodiments of Buddhahood, which encompass the whole cosmos no less than the historical manifestations of the historical Buddha (Makransky 1997, 85-104).³¹ The Kagyud tradition of Vajrayāna, which can be traced back to the 11th century teachings of Tilopa and Nāropa, teaches that the mental visualization of Tantric deities—themselves manifestations of the Buddha’s compassion—can serve as support for spiritual practice as the individual comes to a deeper grasping of the inextricable link of *samsara* and *nirvāna*.³² The work *Chenrezig Lord of Love* by the contemporary Tibetan master Bokar Rinpoche offers an insightful and simultaneously straightforward overview of deity visualization, reminding his readers how the Vajrayāna tradition envisages the nirvanic reality of Buddhahood as already present in the individual, who fails to discern it because of the defilements of ignorance and disordered emotionality (Rinpoche 1997).³³

The course of this paper is to offer a brief overview of the points of contact, as well as of the similarities between these two different theologies of the sacred image, which rest on two different notions of embodiment and the ultimate destiny of the individual. In particular, I will address the question of how different notions of temporality and eschatology are reflected in distinct visions of embodiment and gender. Reading Theodore’s text after becoming acquainted with Bokar Rinpoche’s vision helps one rediscover the specific character of the Christian understanding of embodiment: while the Byzantine icon gestures towards an eschatological horizon in the future where our body will be transfigured by its communion with God, the images of Tibetan deities

³¹ Vajrayāna (literally, the “adamantine” vehicle) can either be considered a special form of Mahayāna (the great vehicle), as a third branch of Buddhism alongside Mahayāna and Theravada (the school of the elders). The term Vajra is used to indicate the indestructible reality of the Buddha nature that is concealed within every aspect of reality. See Paul Williams, *Mahayāna Buddhism: the Doctrinal Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 2008), Ch. 9, 187-209.

³² While Theravada insists that *samsara* and *nirvāna* are distinct realities, Mahayāna claims that *nirvāna* is the authentic essence of *samsara*, and therefore views the whole of reality as inherently pure. A number of Mahayāna schools, as well as Vajrayāna, underscore the identity between *nirvāna* and Buddhahood, so that the whole cosmos becomes an expression of the compassion of the Buddha. See Paul Williams, Ch. 8, 172-87.

³³ The four chief Tibetan schools are dGe lugs pa (which enjoyed political and cultural supremacy in Tibet between 1642 and 1950), bKa brgyud, Sa skya, and rNying ma, the Dalai Lamas always belonged to the dGe lugs pa school, even if they also received instruction in the teachings of the other schools. See Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambala, 2002), Ch. 5-9 (on Kagyud, see Ch. 5, 152-89). The simplified spelling “Kagyud” is used throughout.

serve as a sophisticated *aide-memoir*, reminding one of the intrinsic purity of one's body, which is already one with the Buddha's nirvanic quality.³⁴

The theology of divine embodiment that undergirds Theodore's vision is undergirded by the understanding of the hypostatic union that had become normative for the majority of Eastern churches in the wake of the Council of Chalcedon.³⁵ In the first part of the 5th century, the prolonged disputes on the theological appropriateness of the term "Theotokos" for the Virgin Mary had led to a renewed interest in speculative reflection on the relationship between humanity and divinity in the person of Christ. While the Council of Nicaea had asserted the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, the same council had stopped short of developing an exhaustive theology of Christ's humanity.³⁶ Athanasios' own preference for the term *sarx*—as opposed to *sōma*—in his treatise *De Incarnatione*, as well as his failure to say anything about Christ's soul, ensured that his theology could actually be regarded as compatible with Apollinarian or even later monophysite Christologies (Athanasio 2004, 70-73; 78-88).³⁷ The Chalcedonian assertion of the presence of a full humanity and a full divinity in the person of Christ, which in 553 Constantinople II would equate with the Second Person of the Trinity, would provide the starting point for the later Christological synthesis of Maximos the Confessor, who would envisage the cosmos and the incarnation as mirror images of each other, both regulated by the dialectic of union without confusion.

³⁴ While this article is an experiment in comparative theology rather than an actual instance of inter-religious dialogue, I believe that engaging in a close reading of Buddhist and Christian texts can pave the way to a more informed and sustained dialogue between members of the different traditions.

³⁵ The Council of Chalcedon (451) is considered to be the Fourth Ecumenical Council by the Roman Catholic as well as the Orthodox Churches, but its legitimacy is denied by the oriental Orthodox Churches. This Council promulgated a Christological confession of faith (*horos*), stating that in Christ there was one center of subjectivity (*hypostasis*) and two natures (*physeis*). In this way, the concept of consubstantiality (*homoousia*) deployed at Nicaea to express the ontological relationship of Father and Son is here applied to the ontological relationship between Christ and humanity. See Sarah Coakley, "What Does Chalcedon Solve and What Does it Not" in S. Davis, D. Kendall and G. O' Collins SJ (eds.), *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 143-64.

³⁶ For a quick overview of the development of Christological doctrine, see Gerald O' Collins S.J., *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus Christ* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), Ch. 7-8, 153-203. On the Theotokos dispute, see John McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy: its Theology, History, and Texts* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir Seminary's Press, 2004). Chalcedon's assertion of a single subject in Christ implicitly acknowledged the legitimacy of "Theotokos" language.

³⁷ As the hypostasis of the Logos played the role of the soul, Apollinarian Christology effectively denied the full humanity of Christ.

By the eighth century, the teaching of Christ's "double consubstantiality" with the Godhead and with humanity had become the pivot of speculative theology no less than of spiritual theology. The teaching of the communication of the idioms adumbrated by Cyril of Alexandria, whereby the properties of Christ's divinity are appropriated by his humanity but those of the humanity are also appropriated by the divinity, offers a paradigm for the deification of the individual, who will undergo in her flesh whatever happened in the hypostatic union (Kelly 1978; Meyendorff 1997).³⁸ In his *Aporiae*, Leontius of Jerusalem elaborates further on the nature of the union, suggesting that the divine nature of Christ is enhypostatic, as it rests in a divine hypostasis, whereas his human nature, lacking a corresponding human hypostasis, may be said to be anhypostatic. While so-called semi-Nestorian *homo assumptus* Christologies thought it necessary to postulate a human center of subjectivity in Christ so as to balance the presence of the divine hypostasis, for Leontius this *de facto* Christological asymmetry is what guarantees the effectiveness of the incarnation: Christ is a sort of concrete universal, where the totality of the human nature—in no way different from the humanity we all share—is subsumed into the divine hypostasis, and yet it remains fully human (Gray 2006).³⁹

What is then the nature of Christ's body if Christ has assumed human nature *in general*? The so-called *agraptodocetae* asserted that the teaching of anhypostasy indicated that Christ did not possess any describable human characteristic, and for this reason the Gospels never offered any information about Christ's physical appearance, such as his stature or the color of his hair (Meyendorff 1997, 187). One might object that if one human hypostasis had been assumed, the effects of the redemption would have been limited to just this one individual, but for some the fact that Christ is invested with a general *ousia* might somehow detract from the historical reality of the incarnation. In response to those who viewed anhypostasy as a sort of Trojan horse introducing docetism into the Chalcedonian paradigm, John Damascene insisted in his writings against the iconoclasts that the historical Jesus was invested with a divine hypostasis and two natures, as well as with the characteristics (*idiomata*) of a human individuality. These *idiomata* were what distinguished Christ from his own mother and from all other men and women of his time. In John's vision, the idea that Christ assumed humanity in general, and yet this humanity subsisted *en atomō* (in a particular case), ensures that the hypostatic union impacts humanity as a whole, and simultaneously that his

³⁸ This teaching argues that the properties of each of the two natures of Christ can also be ascribed to the other, thereby legitimizing statements such as "God dies" or "the man Jesus rules the universe."

³⁹ The various *homo assumptus* Christologies that have emerged over the centuries would suggest that Christ was also a human subject, and therefore tended to upset the Chalcedonian balance.

historical body was a body that, as far as its nature was concerned, did not differ from that of other human beings (Damascene 2003, I, 4).⁴⁰

The purpose of Theodore's writings against the iconoclasts is to reassert John Damascene's teaching on Christology, at the same time indicating that the act of venerating icons is the highest form of orthodox behavior. For Theodore, in the representation of Christ's body one may contemplate the mysterious mingling of the uncircumscribable divinity and the circumscribable flesh (Theodore 1981, II, 41-7). As noted by Pelikan in the second volume of his history of theology, iconoclasts were concerned that the legitimacy of icons could be defended arguing that icons represented the humanity of Christ as opposed to the divinity, thereby reintroducing some sort of Nestorian distinction between two dimensions in Christ (Pelikan 1977, 116). Theodore insists not only that the body of Christ bears both the divinity and the humanity, but also that the divinity remains uncircumscribable even as it comes to dwell in the humanity of the incarnate Word. As such, on one hand it is necessary to say that Christ is circumscribable, given that his humanity, albeit general, is contemplated in an individual manner, and on the other hand it is necessary to assert his uncircumscribability: the eternal Logos is the ordering principle of the cosmos, but he is also the principle of subjectivity in the person of Christ (Theodore 1981, II, 1-15).

In this perspective, it is Christ's physical body that is the locus of the hypostatic union, the place where the mysterious exchange of properties between the natures is accomplished in all its glory. The images of Christ that are worshipped by the faithful cannot portray the fullness of the divinity, which escapes pictorial representation, but they represent the deified humanity of the eternal Word, whose every action is performed by the Second Person of the Trinity. Theodore argues that the incarnation ratifies the intrinsic dignity of matter; if Christ had assumed a mere noetic form, we would be justified in remaining in pure mental contemplation, but as Christ chose to embrace our humanity in his "sublime condescension," hence assuming the same body and sufferings that we all share, to refuse to represent Christ's body would be to fail to give God his proper honor (Theodore 1981, I, 7).

The veneration of the images has a propedeutic role, to the extent that it reminds us of the mystery of our salvation, but at the same time it also points to the reality of our individual deification. While earlier authors such as Evagrius Pontikos had been reluctant to envisage a role for images of any kind in the later stages of spiritual progress, Theodore, much like his predecessor John Damascene, insists that if Christ could not be represented, this would entail that he was not truly human, and then our salvation would not have been accomplished. For Theodore, echoing Maximos the Confessor and John Damascene, the hypostatic union is a historical event that marks an

⁴⁰ The contention that Christ's humanity was *en atomō* enabled John Damascene to assert the legitimacy of icon veneration.

irreversible transformation in the ordering of the cosmos; in the incarnation, humanity is subsumed into the divinity, so that it is possible to assert that the hypostasis of Christ is now a composite hypostasis, bearing within itself two natures (Törönen 2007, 95; Meyendorff 1997, 82). Images of Christ invite us to raise our gaze to the end of times, when every individual will be transfigured as Christ once was. The saints are a warrant that this transformation is indeed possible, and by honoring them we actually honor the effectiveness of Christ's salvific work; in John Damascene's earlier treatment of this topic, we are told that the saints are like the cloud of glory that surrounds the victorious general, so that choosing not to represent the saints defrauds Christ of his glory (Damascene 2003, I, 21).⁴¹

The theology of the icon stresses the diachronic dimension of Christian soteriology, where the event of the hypostatic union represents a unique instance of divine involvement with human history, inaugurating a dynamic process whereby the whole cosmos will eventually be transfigured. It is important to note that the school of Origenist spirituality represented by Evagrius and his followers tended to view history as moving according to a circular pattern, and therefore striving towards the restoration of an initial condition of unity when all rational beings were one with God. This teaching, which appears to be suggested by Origen as a possibility in *De Principiis* and is taken up by Evagrius in the *Kephalaia Gnostika*, would effectively envisage individual personhood as a provisional reality that would not endure in the last day (Origen 111-413; Pontikos 1958, Book IV).⁴² On the contrary, the stronger incarnational dimension, which, after the Council of Chalcedon, would become normative in Christian theology, would rather emphasize the uniqueness of the incarnation and effectively underscore the intrinsic value of each and every individual. The fact that traditional Byzantine icons portray the bodies of the saints in the fullness of their glory is a pledge of hope in the resurrection of the dead that will take place on the last day.

The approach developed by the Tibetan writer Bokar Rinpoche (1940-2004) rests on the dialectical relationship between ultimate and conventional reality, which are both present in the images of Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion. The term *bodhicitta*, or "mind of enlightenment" is used to indicate the nirvanic nature of reality, which encompasses an absolute aspect (the realm of emptiness or wisdom) as well as a relative aspect (the realm of form or compassion). While the body of Christ embraces a divine as well as a human nature, Chenrezig encompasses both absolute and conventional *bodhicitta*, which are given a variety of names: "emptiness and compassion," "knowledge and means," "absolute aspect and relative aspect," or "mode of being and mode of manifestation." Yet, while Christ is distinct and separate from us, Chenrezig

⁴¹ John Damascene, *op. cit.*, I, 21.

⁴²In this perspective, there is no ultimate ontological distinction between the individual and Christ.

may be said to *be* within us already, because in the Vajrayāna tradition wisdom and compassion are already potentially within us as part of the awakened state that is our very nature. Rinpoche notes that the different degrees of love and compassion that one can observe between different beings “corresponds to a greater or lesser actualization of this potential, and to the influence in greater or lesser degree of Chenrezig in ourselves.” In what one could call a perichoretic manner, the ultimate nature of the mind as wisdom is the basis and ground of its compassionate manifestation; the body of Chenrezig is the way in which the Buddha nature helps us activate the wisdom and compassion that are already present in us (Rinpoche 1997, 11-17).

While authors such as John Damascene or Theodore the Studite discuss the propedeutic value of painted images, the reflection of Tibetan authors such as Bokar Rinpoche tends to focus on images that are visualized in the mind of the practitioner. The Madhyamaka philosophical tradition that for many centuries was considered normative in Tibet used the term *dharmakāya* (body of dharma) to indicate the all-encompassing, cosmic dimension of Buddhahood, and distinguished it from the co-called *rupakāyas* (body of form), which the manifestations of the former in conventional reality. Bokar Rinpoche presupposes this conceptual differentiation, but he also accepts the Yogācāra-influenced distinction between the manifestations that one encounters in our ordinary reality (*nirmanakāyas*) from those that dwell in the celestial realms of the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas (*sambhogakāyas*). The latter, whose name may be translated as “body of communal enjoyment,” are customarily depicted as having bodies of marvelous beauty and power, adorned in splendid garments and invested with extraordinary powers. The bodhisattva of compassion that the Indian tradition calls Avalokiteshvara, and the Tibetan tradition calls Chenrezig, is one such *sambhogakāya*. While the term “Tantric deity” is often used to indicate these “bodies of enjoyment,” one should not forget that such “deities” are not “gods” in the ordinary sense of the term, but should rather be seen as hypostatizations of qualities that inhere in the human mind, and as such are already present in all of us. The purpose of mind visualizing the body of such deities serves the specific propedeutic purpose of reminding us that our intrinsic nature is no different from Buddhahood, even if ordinarily we are not aware of it.⁴³

Bokar Rinpoche distinguishes two phases in the process of visualization: in the first phase, one mentally recreates the appearance of the deity (*phase of creation*), whereas in the second phase (*phase of completion*) the appearances are dissolved into emptiness. The tradition underscores how in essence the two phases are not separate realities, but they participate of the same Buddha nature; it is the same mind that

⁴³ For an introduction to the teaching of the Buddha bodies, see John Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied*, Ch. 3-4, 29-84; Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth*, Ch. 16, 419-49. From a Madhyamaka perspective, the *dharmakāya* (body of dharma) is identified with ultimate reality, while the *rupakāyas* correspond to the different aspects of conventional reality.

visualizes the image and that dissolves it into emptiness (Rinpoche 1997, 72-87). In the phase of creation, practitioners recite the mantra of Chenrezig and begin to picture the body of Chenrezig as seated in his pure realm, wearing marvelous garments and accompanied by a retinue of supernatural beings. The visual splendor of the deity's appearance is meant to "disengage" us from our ordinary way of perceiving reality as well as our assumption that the conventional reality we inhabit is the only reality in existence. In the words of Bokar Rinpoche, "divine appearances replace ordinary appearances and neutralize our fixation on their reality" (Rinpoche 1997, 61). It is important to remember that the body of the deity that is being visualized only exists within our mind: Chenrezig is an appearance and yet it is devoid of material existence. Every aspect of the body's manifestation has an allegorical meaning, and different texts elaborate at great length on the connections between various Tantric teachings and different part of the deity's appearance: the four arms of Chenrezig indicate the four immeasurables, the two crossed legs suggest the union of *samsara* and *nirvāna* as well as of emptiness and compassion, the multi-colored garments indicate the five wisdoms, and so on.

In the course of the visualization, the individual lets go of one's attachment to the ego, which is a form of pride at the most basic level, and cultivates the so-called "pride of the deity," based on the conviction that "one is Chenrezig." Identification of one's body with the body of Chenrezig should cut the development of ordinary desires and aversions, and the awareness that the body of the deity is a manifestation of an empty reality ensures that this "pride" is not a self-centered boasting.⁴⁴ According to Bokar Rinpoche, the pride of the deity helps one no longer identify with one's illusory "I" and instead affirm one's identity with the Tantric deity. One may object that the replacement of one's identity with another will not constitute a significant change, but the Tibetan tradition envisages this shift as a move from a situation where one grasps at material existence to a situation where one lets go of delusion and experiences peace. The phase of completion, when one lets go of the image of the deity and all phenomena return into emptiness, helps one remember that every aspect of the body of Chenrezig is in fact a visualization of different qualities of awakening, which ultimately possess no form at all (Rinpoche 1997, 64-65).

It is clear that the deified body of Christ and the saints, on one hand, and the glorious body of the Tantric deity, on the other, are the pivot around which revolve two different approaches to spiritual practice and individual transformation. The notion of

⁴⁴ A related issue is of course the use of the sexual energies as a resource for spiritual progress that is ultimately identical with Buddhahood; visualization would then help purify sexual desire from its more self-centered aspects. While Theodore does not discuss sexuality, Maximus the Confessor views the incarnation as healing the conflict between the two genders that sin. See John Stevens, *Lust for Enlightenment: Buddhism and Sex* (Boston: Shambala, 1990); Adam G. Cooper, *The Body in St. Maximus the Confessor: Holy Flesh, Wholly Deified* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

incarnation that undergirds the theology of Theodore the Studite insists on the uniqueness of the hypostatic union, where the whole of our humanity is subsumed into the divinity in an event marking an irreversible change in the very texture of the cosmos. The plurality of *rupakāyāh* in the Tibetan worldview, on the contrary, exists in a timeless horizon where no ontological change is possible, and the manifestations of the Buddha in our reality merely help practitioners uncover a pre-existent reality.

Terms such as deification and “pride of the deity” are intriguingly similar, but the two approaches rest on radically distinct assumptions regarding individual subjectivity and temporality. While some Tibetan traditions—notably Nyingma—have developed “creation narratives” that are intriguingly close to certain strands of the Christian tradition, the emphasis in the Kagyud approach is on the rediscovery of one’s ever present nirvanic reality, which knows of no beginning or end.⁴⁵ For authors such as Theodore, on the contrary, the hypostatic union ensures that within the person of Christ the divinity and the humanity acquire characteristics that belong to the other nature, prefiguring what will be accomplished in the body of the saints at the end of time. Within a framework of temporal progress, where the natural order moves towards its eschatological completion, the incarnation is a unique event that inaugurates the process of cosmic deification. Within an a-temporal reality, on the contrary, there can be an endless plurality of bodily manifestations of Buddhahood, all of which gesture towards the intrinsic unity of *samsara* and *nirvāna*. In the body of Christ and his saints, humanity and divinity mingle in a perichoretic exchange; in the countless bodies of the Buddha and of his manifestations such as Chenrezig, samsaric and nirvanic reality are eternally present, to quip, “without distinction or separation.”

This comparison, while very brief, should help Christian theologians gain a better understanding of the specificity of the Christian—and specifically Orthodox Christian—take on the purpose of sacred images. Both the Byzantine and the Tibetan tradition view them as a support for spiritual practice, and in both cases, be they concrete works of art or mental visualizations, they can exert a transformative impact on the life of the practitioners. In the former case, however, the individual identity of the practitioner is eschatologically preserved; the deified self retains his or her characteristics even as it is fully deified. In the latter case, “pride of the deity” reminds us that one’s identity is only part of conventional reality, and as such the images of the *rupakāyāh* can only bring

⁴⁵ For an example of a Tibetan “creation narrative,” see Anon., *The supreme source: The Fundamental Tantra of the Dzogchen Semde ‘Kunjed Gyalpo’* (Translated and introduced by Chos rgyal nam kha nor bu and A. Clemente. Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Pub., 1999).

about an epistemological transformation, reminding us of what we truly are. A comparative theological reflection on iconography allows one to rediscover how God's manifestation in the flesh inaugurates a new era, where every individual body is rescued from dissolution and comes to participate in the divine life.

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