

“I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur ... I have filled him with the Spirit of God ... to design artistic works ...” (Ex 31:2-4)

✠ Lecture V: On the Veneration of the Holy Icons ✠

In the eighth century, a movement against the veneration of icons arose. The proponents of this movement were called the iconoclasts (icon-breakers) – a significant factor in the rise of the iconoclasts was the influence of Muslims, who, according to the words the Koran, ‘Images are an abomination of the work of Satan’ (v. 92), viewed the veneration of icons as a form of idolatry. When Protestantism came to being in the 16th century, the rejection of the veneration of icons was renewed on the notion that this practice was a form of idol worshipping. They often quote the words of the Old Testament, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.” (Ex 20:4,5; Deut 5:8,9)

In what follows, we shall, by the grace of God, discuss the issue of the veneration of icons:

✠ Iconography Vs. Idolatry:

Indeed idolatry is a major sin and consequently idol worshipers who do not repent will not be saved as St. Paul explains, “Neither ...nor idolaters... will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9,10). However:

- God, who gave us the Second Commandments that forbids idol worshipping, instructed Moses the Prophet to make a fiery serpent and put it on a pole (Num 21:8) for the people to look at and be healed from the snakebites. Also, our Lord referred to this serpent on the pole and considered it a symbol of His death on the cross (Jn 3:14) – Now when Moses the Prophet made this carved image of the serpent it was not considered breaking the Second Commandment.
- God instructed Moses the prophet to make two cherubim of gold at the two ends of the mercy seat (Ex 25:18) – This also was not considered breaking the Second Commandment.
- It was written about King Solomon, “Then he carved all the walls of the temple all around ... with carved images of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers ... The two doors were of olive wood; and he carved on them figures of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers, and overlaid them with gold” (1 King 6:29-31).

→ Thus, we conclude that religious artistic work is not forbidden as long as it is not to be worshipped.

- It was written, “Then Joshua tore his clothes, and fell on earth on his face before the ark of the Lord until evening” (Josh 7:6). – Nobody ever suggested that Joshua the Prophet worshipped the Ark of the Covenant.
- Likewise, King David’s veneration of the Ark (2 Sam 6:12-15) was never viewed as idolatry. In fact, Michal who criticized her husband for belittling himself by dancing in front of the Ark was punished by the Lord (2 Sam 6:23).

→ Thus, we conclude that the veneration of religious artifacts is not a sin. Worship is reserved to the Holy Trinity alone. We do not honor the material from which icons are manufactured but rather the honor pertains to whatever the icon represent (Lord Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, The cross, saints etc.).

→ Icons are commonly called “windows to heaven” for they help our thoughts ascend to God. Just as we are helped by the word to ascend beyond the word, so too we are led by the icons to rise above the icons. Correspondingly, just as God wants our hearing to be made holy through spiritual discourse, so too He wants our sight to be made holy via the holy icons. Iconography dates back to the apostolic era for we read about St. Luke the Evangelist who painted an icon or more for St. Mary.

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*Comparative Theology*’ by H.H. pope Shenouda III.