

# Embodied Holiness: A Contemporary Theological Appraisal of St. John Damascene on the Veneration of Saints and Relics

Okigbo, Ferdinand Chukwunwike

Department of Philosophy, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbaram

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## ABSTRACT

This research offers a critical and ecumenically framed theological appraisal of St. John Damascene's doctrine of the veneration of saints and relics, examining its coherence, limits, and contemporary relevance within a plural Christian context. While deeply rooted in patristic tradition, this doctrine has remained contested, particularly within Protestant and secular frameworks that regard relic devotion as superstitious or as a displacement of Christ's unique mediatorship. Rather than reproducing Damascene's teaching as confessional apologetics, the study reconstructs his theology within its eighth-century Byzantine context, situates it within broader patristic and sacramental anthropology, and tests its coherence against Protestant and secular objections. Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative historical-theological and comparative approach, combining close textual analysis of *De Fide Orthodoxa* (Book IV, Chapter XV) with engagement in patristic scholarship, contemporary sacramental theology, and ecumenical perspectives. The analysis examines Damascene's incarnational anthropology, his theology of embodied holiness, and his logic of material mediation, while critically engaging concerns about idolatry, superstition, devotional excess, and the instrumentalization of sacred objects. It argues that Damascene's theology becomes theologically viable when reframed within a symbolic and sacramental grammar rather than a magical or sensationalist one, and that relic veneration can be interpreted as a sacramental sign of embodied holiness, ecclesial memory, and the continuity of divine grace in material reality. From an ecumenical standpoint, the research proposes that Damascene's theology need not function as a confessional imposition but as a conceptual resource for contemporary theological reflection on embodiment, holiness, and the communion of saints across Christian traditions.

Veneration of Saints, Relics, Embodied Holiness, Incarnational Anthropology, Ecclesial Memory

## INTRODUCTION

The veneration of saints and their relics has long occupied a contested space within Christian theology. While deeply embedded in patristic tradition and liturgical practice, it has also been the subject of sustained theological criticism, particularly within Protestant and secular frameworks that regard such devotion as superstitious, idolatrous, or incompatible with a Christ-centred soteriology. In modern Christian consciousness, the practice is frequently marginalized or misunderstood, perceived either as a pre-modern remnant or as a devotional excess that distracts from the unique mediatorship of Christ. Yet historically, the theology of relics and saintly veneration emerged not from popular piety alone but from a rigorous theological reflection on the Incarnation, sacramentality, and the continuity of divine action in material reality.

Within this contested field, St. John Damascene (c. 675-749) occupies a distinctive and underexplored position. Writing in the context of the iconoclastic controversies of the eighth century, Damascene developed a comprehensive incarnational theology that extended beyond sacred images to include the honour accorded to saints and their bodily remains. In *De Fide Orthodoxa*, especially Book IV, Chapter XV, he articulates a theological logic in which the saints are described as "friends of Christ," "sons and heirs of God," and "living temples" in whom divine grace dwells bodily. For Damascene, the veneration of saints and relics is not an arbitrary devotional practice but a direct implication of the Incarnation: if God has assumed material flesh and sanctified human nature in Christ, then matter itself becomes capable of mediating divine grace.

Modern theological scholarship has increasingly emphasized the sacramental and embodied dimensions of Christian faith (Schmemmann, 1973; Chauvet, 2001; Bynum, 1995), yet Damascene's theology of relics remains insufficiently integrated into contemporary debates on embodiment, ecclesial memory, and holiness. While historical studies have documented the development of relic devotion in late antiquity (Brown, 1981), and systematic theologians have explored sacramentality and material mediation, few studies have offered a sustained theological appraisal of Damascene's doctrine of relics within a critical and ecumenical framework. As a result, his theology is often either uncritically affirmed within confessional contexts or dismissed as an archaic curiosity within modern theological discourse.

This theological work seeks to address that lacuna by offering a contemporary theological appraisal of St. John Damascene's teaching on the veneration of saints and relics. Rather than reproducing his arguments in a merely apologetic or devotional manner, the study situates his thought within the broader patristic tradition, engages contemporary sacramental anthropology, and critically examines Protestant and secular objections to relic devotion. In doing so, it reframes Damascene's theology as a symbolic grammar of embodiment in which matter participates in divine grace without displacing the unique mediation of Christ.

The study is guided by three interrelated research questions:

- (1) How does St. John Damascene's theology of saints and relics cohere with the broader patristic and sacramental tradition?
- (2) To what extent can his incarnational logic withstand contemporary Protestant and secular critiques of relic veneration?
- (3) How can Damascene's theology be reframed within an ecumenical context without collapsing into confessional apologetics?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks not merely to restate Damascene's teaching but to critically appraise its theological coherence and contemporary relevance.

Far from being a devotional anomaly, his theology offers a coherent vision of embodied holiness, ecclesial memory, and the continuity of divine grace in material reality. In an age marked by disembodied spirituality, secular reductionism, and moral fragmentation, Damascene's incarnational logic invites renewed theological reflection on the bodily dimension of salvation and the enduring relevance of the communion of saints.

## METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

This study adopts a qualitative, historical-theological, and comparative methodological framework in order to critically appraise St. John Damascene's theology of the veneration of saints and relics within a contemporary ecumenical context. Rather than approaching Damascene's doctrine as a self-evident devotional truth, the analysis treats it as a historically situated theological construction that must be reconstructed, interpreted, and critically tested against broader patristic tradition, contemporary sacramental theology, and competing Christian perspectives.

The primary source for this study is John Damascene's *De Fide Orthodoxa*, Book IV, Chapter XV, read within the intellectual and ecclesial context of the eighth-century Byzantine world and the iconoclastic controversy (Pelikan, 1974; Meyendorff, 1983). This contextual reconstruction draws on patristic scholarship and historical theology to situate Damascene's claims within the wider development of early Christian doctrines of embodiment, sanctity, and material mediation. The study thus avoids anachronistic readings by interpreting Damascene's theology as a response to specific doctrinal, political, and ecclesial pressures of his time.

Methodologically, the analysis proceeds in three interrelated stages. First, it offers a close textual and theological reconstruction of Damascene's anthropology of holiness, focusing on his descriptions of the saints as "friends of Christ," "sons and heirs of God," and "living temples" of divine indwelling. This stage examines how his

theology of embodied sanctity emerges from biblical exegesis, patristic tradition, and an incarnational metaphysics that affirms the participation of matter in divine grace.

Second, the study situates Damascene's theology of relics within broader patristic and contemporary sacramental anthropology (Schmemmann, 1973; Chauvet, 2001; Lossky, 1976). Drawing on both Eastern and Western theological traditions, it engages scholars who have emphasized the symbolic, sacramental, and embodied dimensions of Christian faith. This comparative analysis enables an assessment of whether Damascene's logic of material mediation coheres with later theological developments or whether it represents a historically contingent devotional construction.

Third, the study critically engages counter-arguments from Protestant and secular perspectives (Calvin, 1559/1960; McGrath, 2017). Classical Protestant objections to relic veneration, particularly concerns about idolatry, superstition, and the displacement of Christ's unique mediatorship, are examined in dialogue with Damascene's incarnational framework. Secular critiques that interpret relic devotion as a pre-modern or irrational practice are likewise addressed. This critical engagement functions as a theological stress test, evaluating the coherence, limits, and ecumenical viability of Damascene's doctrine rather than assuming its normative validity.

Throughout the analysis, a clear distinction is maintained between devotional affirmation and scholarly theological evaluation. While recognizing the internal coherence of Damascene's theological vision, the study does not presuppose its universal normative authority. Instead, it seeks to determine whether his theology of relic veneration can be reframed sacramentally rather than superstitiously, symbolically rather than magically, and ecumenically rather than confessionally.

By integrating historical reconstruction, comparative theology, and critical engagement with opposing perspectives, this methodological framework enables a shift from descriptive patristic exposition to analytical theological appraisal. It thus provides the conceptual tools necessary for assessing both the internal coherence and contemporary relevance of St. John Damascene's theology of the veneration of saints and relics.

### **The Saints as Embodied Holiness in Damascene's Theology**

At the centre of St. John Damascene's theology of sanctity lies a rigorously incarnational anthropology. His account of the saints is not hagiographical ornamentation but a systematic extension of his Christological commitments. For Damascene, holiness is neither a purely interior state nor an abstract moral ideal; it is an embodied participation in divine life that renders human persons and their bodies sites of theological significance.

Damascene's description of the saints as "friends of Christ" situates sanctity within a relational ontology. Drawing on the Johannine tradition (John 15:14-15), he interprets friendship with Christ not sentimentally but theologically: friendship signifies intimacy grounded in obedience, revelation, and participatory communion. Saints are not honoured because of hierarchical privilege but because their lives exhibit a degree of conformity to Christ that renders them transparent to divine grace. Analytically, this relocates sanctity from an extrinsic reward system to an ontological participation in divine life.

His designation of the saints as "sons and heirs of God" further intensifies this participatory framework. Rooted in Pauline theology (Rom. 8:17; Gal. 4:7), this language signifies an ontological transformation rather than a merely juridical adoption. Sanctity, for Damascene, is the *telos* of baptismal identity. Saints exemplify what it means to exist as heirs within the divine economy. Their honour, therefore, functions symbolically as an affirmation of humanity's eschatological destiny rather than as a cultic elevation of exceptional individuals.

Damascene's provocative description of the saints as "gods and kings," explicitly qualified as not by nature but by grace, introduces a further anthropological dimension. Here sanctity is interpreted as the restoration of human sovereignty over disordered passions. Drawing implicitly on classical Christian ascetical anthropology, Damascene construes holiness as the reconstitution of the divine image within the human person. Analytically,

this reframes sanctity not as moral exceptionalism but as healed freedom. Saints are honoured because they embody the possibility of human agency transfigured by grace.

The depiction of the saints as “treasuries” and “habitations” of God consolidates this incarnational logic. Drawing on biblical imagery of divine indwelling (Lev. 26:12; 2 Cor. 6:16; Wis. 3:1), Damascene articulates a theology in which sanctity renders the human body a site of sacramental presence. This claim resists both dualistic devaluation of the body and materialistic reductionism. Within this framework, the body is not an accidental instrument of the soul but an intrinsic participant in the economy of salvation.

Finally, Damascene’s assertion that the saints “stood with confidence before God” introduces an intercessory anthropology grounded in relational continuity rather than metaphysical speculation. Saints intercede not because they acquire post-mortem supernatural powers but because their communion with God, established in life, persists beyond death. Analytically, this reframes intercession as an extension of ecclesial communion rather than as a breach of Christ’s unique mediatorship.

Taken together, these anthropological claims articulate a coherent theology of embodied holiness. Sanctity, in Damascene’s framework, is not an extrinsic honour conferred upon exemplary individuals but a participatory state of being that reveals the *telos* of human existence. When reframed critically, his theology contributes to contemporary debates on embodiment, moral formation, and the sacramental character of human life without collapsing into devotional romanticism.

## The Theological Logic of Honouring the Bodily Remains of the Saints

For St. John Damascene, the honour accorded to the saints does not end with their earthly lives. Their bodily remains- whether intact, fragmented, or transformed- continue to mediate divine power in ways that reveal the profound sacramentality of Christian faith. In a culture that often spiritualizes religion and marginalizes the body, Damascene’s insistence that relics are “fountains of salvation” and sources of “manifold blessings” offers a bold corrective (Okigbo, 2015). His theology of relics emerges not from superstition but from a rigorous understanding of the Incarnation: if God has taken matter into union with himself, then matter itself becomes capable of bearing divine grace.

### a. Relics as Fountains of Salvation

Damascene begins by appealing to Scripture. If water flowed from a rock in the desert (Num. 20:11) and if a jawbone of an ass miraculously produced water to revive Samson (Judg. 15:19), why should it be incredible that the remains of saints could become conduits of divine power? His hermeneutical strategy is intentional: he frames relics not as anomalies but as *continuations of God’s historical pattern of acting through matter*. The saints’ bodies, having been temples of the Holy Spirit, retain a sanctified character that allows God’s power to operate through them.

For contemporary theology, this raises an important insight: holiness is not merely spiritual but embodied. The saint does not become holy despite having a body, but *through* the body, which participates in the journey toward deification. Honouring relics, therefore, becomes a recognition that human bodies are destined for resurrection and capable of bearing divine glory even now.

### b. The Sweet Fragrance of Holiness

His second argument concerns the “oil of sweet fragrance” that is said to emanate from some relics. While modern readers may be tempted to spiritualize or dismiss such claims, Damascene employs them sacramentally: fragrance becomes a sign of participation in heavenly realities. In the Christian imagination, fragrance often symbolizes sanctity (cf. Eph. 5:2), and the incorruptibility or aromatic exudation of relics is interpreted as an eschatological sign- a foretaste of glorification.

He does not attribute such phenomena to natural conditions but to the transforming power of God. The saints’ contact with divine glory renders their bodies places where heaven touches earth. Contemporary theology can

draw on this to reclaim the notion that sanctification involves the whole person, and that grace leaves traces not only on the soul but also, at times, on the body.

### **c. Manifold Blessings and the Miraculous Power of Relics**

He proceeds to a more extensive enumeration: demons are driven away, diseases are cured, the blind see, lepers are cleansed, and various troubles are overcome through contact with holy remains. He asks pointedly, “How could a dead body work miracles?” only to answer that *the saints are not dead* in the Christian sense. Death, he argues, is merely sleep for those who die in Christ; their bodies participate in the life-giving power of the Resurrection.

This argument unveils a central tenet of his theology: the saints are alive in God, and their bodies, even in death, remain instruments of divine action. Their relics are not magical objects but sacramental signs- extensions of the incarnational logic by which God uses material reality to communicate grace.

In contemporary pastoral practice, this insight is profoundly relevant. Modern Christians frequently struggle with a fragmented spirituality that isolates faith from the physical world. The veneration of relics teaches that God does not abandon the material order; instead, He redeems and elevates it. The saints’ bodies, which once bore witness to Christ through suffering, prayer, and virtue, become visible reminders that salvation is embodied and communal.

### **d. Relics and the Communion of Saints**

Honouring relics also affirms the continuity of the Church across time and space. For Damascene, relics are *signs of ecclesial memory*- tangible reminders that the Church is one body united in Christ. To honour the remains of the saints is to declare that death does not sever communion, and that the Church militant remains in living dialogue with the Church triumphant.

In an age that often forgets its spiritual ancestors, relics perform a corrective function: they anchor the Church’s identity in concrete history. They allow believers to encounter the past not as a distant narrative but as a living presence. This is why Damascene insists that the saints are “patrons of the whole race” who intercede continually for humanity. Their relics become focal points for such intercession, drawing the faithful into deeper communion with the heavenly Church.

### **e. Relics as Eschatological Signs**

Finally, his theology sees relics as anticipations of the resurrection. When Christians honour relics, they proclaim their belief that the body will rise in glory. The saints’ remains, touched by grace, already bear signs of this future transformation. The inexplicable preservation of certain bodies, the reported miracles around relics, and the enduring veneration they inspire all point toward the ultimate destiny of the human body as a participant in divine life.

In a contemporary world marked by materialism on one side and disembodied spirituality on the other, relics offer a sacramental imagination that holds matter and spirit together. They proclaim a hope that is not merely internal or symbolic but cosmic and embodied

### **Protestant and Secular Objections to the Veneration of Saints and Relics**

Despite its deep roots in patristic theology and Christian tradition, the veneration of saints and relics has been persistently contested, particularly within Protestant and secular intellectual frameworks. These critiques are not merely external polemics but raise substantive theological and epistemological concerns that any contemporary appraisal of Damascene’s theology must address. Engaging these objections is therefore essential for moving beyond confessional affirmation towards critical theological analysis.

Classical Protestant theology has consistently challenged relic veneration on the grounds of idolatry, superstition, and the displacement of Christ’s unique mediatorship. John Calvin famously denounced the cult of relics as a

“theatre of superstition,” arguing that such practices divert devotion away from Christ and obscure the sufficiency of his atoning work (Calvin, *Institutes*, I.11). From this perspective, relic veneration is interpreted as a materialized spirituality that contradicts the New Testament emphasis on faith in Christ alone (*solus Christus*) and undermines the principle that Christ is the sole mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5).

Contemporary Protestant theologians have refined these objections by situating them within broader concerns about the nature of religious symbolism and the dangers of devotional excess. Critics argue that relic devotion risks reifying grace, treating material objects as quasi-magical conduits of divine power rather than as symbolic signs that point beyond themselves. From this standpoint, the miraculous claims associated with relics are interpreted either as psychological projections or as socio-cultural constructions shaped by pre-modern worldviews (McGrath, 2017). The underlying concern is not merely about historical abuses but about a theological logic that appears to compromise the transcendence and freedom of God.

From a secular perspective, relic veneration is frequently dismissed as an irrational residue of pre-scientific religiosity. Enlightenment-influenced critiques interpret the cult of relics as a form of magical thinking incompatible with modern rationality and empirical verification. Sociological and anthropological accounts often reduce relic devotion to mechanisms of social cohesion, power legitimization, or emotional consolation, rather than acknowledging any transcendent dimension of divine action (Brown, 1981). Within this framework, reports of miracles associated with relics are typically explained in terms of placebo effects, collective suggestion, or cultural symbolism.

These Protestant and secular critiques expose genuine theological and pastoral risks. Historically, relic veneration has indeed been susceptible to distortion through commercialization, devotional excess, and the instrumentalization of sacred objects. Moreover, uncritical affirmation of miraculous claims can undermine theological credibility and foster forms of piety detached from ethical conversion and ecclesial accountability. Any contemporary retrieval of Damascene’s theology must therefore acknowledge these dangers rather than dismiss them.

Nevertheless, Damascene’s incarnational logic offers a structured theological response to these objections. His theology does not posit relics as autonomous sources of power but as sacramental signs through which God freely acts. The efficacy of relics, in his framework, derives not from their materiality as such but from their participation in the sanctifying grace of God. This logic parallels sacramental theology more broadly, in which material elements (water, bread, wine, oil) mediate divine grace without displacing God as its source (Schmemmann, 1973; Chauvet, 2001). Within this symbolic grammar, relic veneration does not compete with Christ’s unique mediatorship but presupposes it, functioning as an extension of the incarnational economy inaugurated in Christ.

Furthermore, Damascene’s theology resists the charge of idolatry by grounding veneration in relational and participatory categories rather than in ontological confusion. Honour directed towards relics is ultimately honour directed towards God, whose grace sanctified the bodies of the saints. This distinction between worship (*latría*) and veneration (*dulia*), though more fully articulated in later scholastic theology, is already implicit in Damascene’s insistence that saints and their remains are honoured only as participants in divine life, not as independent divine agents.

Within an ecumenical horizon, Damascene’s theology can therefore be reframed not as a rival soteriology but as a symbolic affirmation of the bodily dimension of salvation. While Protestant concerns about devotional excess and the sufficiency of Christ remain theologically significant, they do not necessarily invalidate the incarnational logic underlying relic veneration. Rather, they invite a disciplined retrieval of the practice that emphasizes its sacramental, symbolic, and ecclesial dimensions rather than miraculous sensationalism.

In this light, the theological viability of Damascene’s doctrine does not depend on the empirical verification of miraculous claims but on the coherence of its underlying anthropology and Christology. His theology affirms that salvation is not a disembodied transaction but an embodied transformation that encompasses both soul and body. When reframed within this critical and ecumenical framework, the veneration of saints and relics can be

interpreted not as a pre-modern superstition but as a theological symbol of embodied holiness, ecclesial memory, and the continuity of divine grace in material reality.

### **Modes of Veneration and the Theological Grammar of Honour in Damascene's Thought**

A coherent theological appraisal of the veneration of saints and relics requires a precise conceptual distinction between the various forms of honour articulated within Christian tradition. Although St. John Damascene does not employ the later scholastic terminology of *latria*, *hyperdulia*, and *dulia*, his theological logic presupposes these differentiated modes of honour. Clarifying these distinctions is analytically necessary, particularly in light of Protestant critiques that interpret saintly veneration as a violation of the exclusive worship owed to God.

Damascene's argument operates within a relational grammar of honour: the reverence directed toward saints and their relics is not ontologically equivalent to divine worship but is derivative, participatory, and referential. Honour given to the saints ultimately terminates in God, whose grace sanctified their lives and bodies. This mediatory structure of veneration enables Damascene to affirm the legitimacy of saintly honour without collapsing it into idolatry or rival soteriology.

#### **a. *Latria*: Worship Reserved for God Alone**

Within the logic implicit in Damascene's theology, *latria*- the adoration and sacrificial worship due to God-remains categorically non-transferable. Although his treatise does not explicitly define this term, his Christological framework presupposes that only God is worthy of absolute worship. Saints and relics are not approached as autonomous sources of divine power but as participants in God's sanctifying action.

This distinction is foundational for ecumenical dialogue. When veneration is analytically separated from worship, the charge that relic devotion displaces Christ's unique mediatorship is significantly weakened. In Damascene's framework, all honour given to saints is parasitic upon the worship of God; it presupposes, rather than competes with, divine *latria*.

#### **b. *Hyperdulia*: The Unique Veneration of Mary**

Damascene's exhortation to honour Mary as "strictly and truly the Mother of God" presupposes a qualitatively distinct form of veneration grounded in Christology rather than sentimentality. Although he does not articulate the later term *hyperdulia*, his theological logic anticipates it by grounding Marian honour in the ontological singularity of the Incarnation.

Mary's body functioned as the historical site of the Word's embodiment; consequently, her sanctity is not merely moral but Christological. Within Damascene's incarnational metaphysics, this establishes a differentiated mode of veneration that remains subordinate to divine worship while exceeding the honour accorded to other saints. When analytically framed, Marian devotion appears not as devotional excess but as a theological corollary of Christological orthodoxy.

#### **c. *Dulia*: Veneration of Saints and Angels**

The third mode of honour, later termed *dulia*, corresponds to Damascene's account of the saints as "friends of Christ" and "patrons of the whole race." This form of veneration involves respect, gratitude, imitation, and intercessory remembrance rather than adoration. Saints are honoured not for intrinsic divinity but for their participatory union with God.

Analytically, this distinction reframes saintly veneration as a symbolic enactment of ecclesial communion rather than as a rival cultic system. Within this framework, saints function as embodied theological signs whose lives manifest the transformative efficacy of divine grace. Their honour does not terminate in themselves but signifies the eschatological destiny of humanity as participation in divine life.

#### **d. Concrete Expressions of Veneration as Theological Symbols**

Damascene identifies several concrete practices associated with veneration- raising temples, offering gifts, commemorating feast days, singing hymns, and cultivating imitation. Rather than interpreting these practices devotionally, they can be analyzed as symbolic enactments of theological convictions.

The construction of churches dedicated to saints functions as a material inscription of ecclesial memory. It embeds historical witness into spatial form, thereby integrating the past into the Church's liturgical present. Gift offerings, whether ancient fruit offerings or contemporary candles and alms, signify gratitude and dependence rather than transactional exchange. Feast days and liturgical hymns preserve narrative continuity, situating individual believers within a trans-generational community of faith.

Imitation (*mimesis*) emerges as the most theologically significant form of veneration. By exhorting believers to become "living monuments," Damascene implicitly subordinates ritual honour to ethical transformation. This emphasis reorients veneration from external performance towards moral and spiritual formation, thereby neutralizing the critique that saintly devotion is intrinsically superficial or magical.

#### **e. The Limits and Risks of Veneration**

Damascene's theology also presupposes implicit constraints on legitimate veneration. Honour becomes theologically disordered when it is detached from ethical conversion, ecclesial accountability, and Christological reference. Historically, devotional practices have indeed been susceptible to commercialization, emotionalism, and instrumentalization of sacred objects.

When analytically reframed, these distortions appear not as logical consequences of Damascene's theology but as deviations from its internal grammar. His insistence that honour to saints is honour to God functions as a normative boundary that resists idolatrous excess. Within a contemporary framework, this boundary supports a disciplined retrieval of saintly veneration that prioritizes theological coherence over devotional sensationalism.

#### **f. Ecumenical Implications of Differentiated Honour**

From an ecumenical standpoint, the analytical distinction between *latría*, *hyperdulía*, and *dulia* offers a conceptual bridge for dialogue with Protestant critiques. When veneration is articulated as derivative, symbolic, and participatory, it becomes possible to interpret saintly honour as an extension of ecclesial memory and moral exemplarity rather than as a violation of Christ's unique mediatorship.

This reframing does not require uniform devotional practices across Christian traditions. Rather, it invites a shared theological reflection on how honour, memory, and embodiment function within Christian life. In this light, Damascene's theology contributes not a confessional imposition but a conceptual grammar for articulating the relational structure of honour within an incarnational worldview.

#### **Damascene's Hierarchy of Sanctity and Its Theological Logic**

In the concluding portion of his treatise, St. John Damascene articulates a differentiated account of those who are to be honoured within the Christian community. Although his enumeration is historically conditioned by the saints known before his time, it reflects a coherent theological logic rather than an arbitrary devotional catalogue. Analytically reframed, this hierarchy of sanctity functions as a symbolic map of salvation history and ecclesial vocation.

Damascene begins with the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom he honours as "strictly and truly the Mother of God." This prioritization is not devotional sentimentality but Christological necessity. Marian sanctity is grounded in the ontological singularity of the Incarnation: her body functioned as the historical site of the Word's embodiment. Analytically, this establishes Mary's unique status as a theological corollary of orthodox Christology rather than as a devotional exception. Her veneration (*hyperdulía*) emerges as a differentiated mode of honour grounded in her singular participation in the mystery of Christ.

John the Baptist occupies the next position in Damascene's hierarchy, described as forerunner, prophet, apostle, and martyr. This multifaceted identity positions him as a liminal figure bridging the Old and New Covenants. Analytically, John represents prophetic vocation within salvation history. His sanctity is not derived from institutional authority but from fidelity to divine mission. Within Damascene's framework, John functions as a paradigmatic witness whose life embodies the transition from promise to fulfilment.

The apostles follow as foundational witnesses of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Their sanctity is grounded not merely in personal virtue but in ecclesial vocation. Analytically, apostolic veneration affirms the historical continuity of Christian revelation. Saints are not isolated spiritual achievers but participants in a transmitted tradition. The apostles' honour thus secures doctrinal stability and ecclesial identity across generations.

Martyrs occupy a distinct position as those who participate most radically in the Paschal Mystery. By "drinking Christ's cup," they embody a maximal form of conformity to Christ. Analytically, martyrdom is interpreted not as heroic voluntarism but as embodied soteriology. Their veneration affirms that salvation is not an abstract transaction but a lived participation in Christ's death and resurrection. In this sense, martyrs function as theological icons of sacrificial love.

The holy fathers and ascetics represent another modality of sanctity. Damascene interprets their prolonged struggle of conscience, prayer, and doctrinal labour as a form of spiritual martyrdom. Analytically, this category expands sanctity beyond spectacular suffering to include sustained moral and intellectual fidelity. Their veneration affirms the formative power of discipline, teaching, and perseverance within the ecclesial community.

Finally, Damascene includes the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, thereby affirming the unity of salvation history. Analytically, this inclusion resists super-sessionist tendencies by integrating pre-Christian sanctity into the continuum of divine economy. Sanctity is thus interpreted not as a post-Incarnational novelty but as a trans-historical participation in divine purpose.

When critically reframed, Damascene's hierarchy of sanctity functions not as a rigid ranking of spiritual merit but as a *theological typology of vocation*. Each category embodies a distinct mode of conformity to God's salvific will: Marian receptivity, prophetic witness, apostolic mission, martyrial sacrifice, ascetical discipline, and patriarchal anticipation. In this light, veneration becomes a symbolic recognition of *diverse pathways of holiness* rather than a cultic elevation of spiritual elites.

From an ecumenical standpoint, this hierarchy need not be received as a confessional imposition. Rather, it can be interpreted as a conceptual grammar for articulating the plurality of Christian vocations within a unified soteriological horizon. When retrieved analytically, Damascene's typology of sanctity offers a disciplined theological framework for integrating embodiment, history, and moral formation into a coherent vision of holiness.

### **Contemporary Relevance: An Ecumenical Retrieval of Embodied Holiness**

St. John Damascene's theology of the saints and their relics acquires renewed significance when interpreted within the horizon of contemporary theological, cultural, and ecumenical concerns. While his doctrine emerged within a specific eighth-century Byzantine context, its underlying incarnational logic addresses enduring questions about embodiment, sacramentality, ecclesial memory, and the continuity of divine action in material reality. When critically reframed rather than devotionally reproduced, his theology offers conceptual resources for a plural Christian context marked by disembodied spirituality, secular reductionism, and theological fragmentation.

#### **a. Embodiment, Anthropology, and the Unity of Body and Spirit**

One of the most pressing challenges of contemporary culture is the destabilization of Christian anthropology. Modern thought frequently oscillates between materialism, which reduces the human person to biological mechanisms, and disembodied spirituality, which treats the body as an obstacle to authentic selfhood. Within

this cultural tension, Damascene's insistence that saints are "living temples of God" articulates a theological anthropology in which embodiment is intrinsic to salvation.

From an ecumenical perspective, this emphasis resonates with broader Christian affirmations of bodily resurrection and the sacramentality of creation. While Protestant traditions often remain cautious about material mediation, many contemporary theologians across denominational lines increasingly acknowledge that Christian faith cannot be reduced to interior belief alone. Damascene's theology thus contributes to a shared Christian grammar of embodiment in which matter is neither divinized nor discarded but participates symbolically in divine grace.

### **b. Sacramentality Beyond Confessional Boundaries**

Damascene's theology of relics is grounded in a sacramental imagination that extends beyond the formal rites of the Church to include the sanctified bodies of holy persons. Although Protestant theology traditionally restricts sacramentality to explicitly instituted rites, contemporary sacramental theology has increasingly emphasized symbolic mediation, embodied ritual, and the material dimensions of grace.

When reframed within this broader symbolic framework, Damascene's doctrine can be interpreted not as a rival sacramental system but as a theological affirmation of God's freedom to act through material reality. This reframing allows relic veneration to be understood not as a magical practice but as a symbolic enactment of Christian hope in bodily resurrection and divine indwelling. In this sense, his theology invites ecumenical dialogue on the limits and possibilities of material mediation in Christian faith.

### **c. Ecclesial Memory, Tradition, and the Continuity of Holiness**

Damascene's insistence that the saints remain active members of the ecclesial community highlights the role of memory in sustaining Christian identity. In a cultural context characterized by historical amnesia and rapid social change, the veneration of saints functions as a symbolic practice that preserves continuity across generations.

From an ecumenical standpoint, this emphasis does not require uniform devotional practices. Rather, it affirms a shared Christian concern for remembering exemplary witnesses of faith whose lives embody theological truth. Whether through liturgical calendars, commemorative practices, or narrative remembrance, Christian communities across traditions participate in the construction of ecclesial memory. Damascene's theology thus contributes to a broader theology of tradition in which holiness is transmitted not only through doctrine but through embodied historical witness.

### **d. Secularism, Transcendence, and the Limits of Rational Reductionism**

In secular contexts that confine truth to empirical verification, relic veneration appears as an anachronistic practice incompatible with modern rationality. However, Damascene's theology challenges the epistemological reductionism that excludes transcendence from material reality. His doctrine presupposes a metaphysical openness of creation to divine action, an assumption that stands in tension with secular naturalism.

While contemporary theology cannot simply reproduce pre-modern miracle narratives without critical discernment, Damascene's incarnational logic invites renewed reflection on the limits of scientific rationality in accounting for religious experience. When interpreted symbolically rather than sensationally, relic devotion can be understood as a theological protest against the confinement of meaning to the measurable. In this sense, his theology offers a resource for Christian engagement with secular modernity that neither retreats into irrationalism nor capitulates to reductionism.

### **e. Holiness, Moral Formation, and the Ethics of Imitation**

Damascene's exhortation that believers become "living monuments" through imitation of the saints situates holiness within an ethical and formative horizon rather than within devotional sentimentality. His theology emphasizes that the primary significance of saints lies not in miraculous phenomena but in the exemplary character of their lives.

From an ecumenical perspective, this focus on imitation resonates strongly with Protestant and Catholic moral theology alike. Saints function as concrete moral exemplars whose lives embody theological virtues such as faith, hope, charity, perseverance, and humility. When retrieved critically, Damascene's theology supports a model of Christian formation in which holiness is accessible, ethical, and communal rather than elitist or mystical.

#### **f. The Preferential Presence of God in the Humble and the Holy**

A final dimension of Damascene's contemporary relevance lies in his implicit theology of divine preference. The saints, in his account, are not exalted because of worldly success or institutional power but because of fidelity, suffering, and conformity to Christ. This emphasis challenges contemporary forms of religious commodification and celebrity culture that distort Christian witness.

Within an ecumenical horizon, this theology affirms a shared Christian conviction that God's presence is disclosed most powerfully in humility, vulnerability, and sacrificial love. The saints thus become theological signs of God's preferential presence in the marginal and the faithful, offering a counter-narrative to consumerist forms of Christianity.

#### **g. Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Embodied Holiness**

When reframed critically and ecumenically, Damascene's theology of saints and relics does not function as a confessional imposition but as a theological resource for articulating an embodied vision of Christian holiness. It invites diverse Christian traditions to reconsider the bodily, historical, and communal dimensions of salvation without requiring uniform devotional practices.

In this ecumenical retrieval, relic veneration need not be defended as universally normative. Rather, it can be interpreted as a symbolic practice that expresses a deeper theological intuition shared across Christian traditions: that salvation is embodied, that holiness leaves traces in history, and that the communion of saints transcends temporal boundaries. Damascene's incarnational logic thus contributes to a contemporary theological grammar in which matter and spirit, history and hope, and individuality and communion are held together within the mystery of divine grace.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research has offered a critical and ecumenically framed theological appraisal of St. John Damascene's doctrine of the veneration of saints and relics. Rather than reproducing his teaching as a confessional apologetic, the analysis has reconstructed his theology within its historical context, situated it within broader patristic and sacramental anthropology, and tested its coherence against Protestant and secular objections. This methodological approach has enabled a shift from devotional affirmation to analytical theological evaluation.

At the core of Damascene's theology lies a rigorously incarnational logic. His insistence that saints are "friends of Christ," "sons and heirs of God," and "living temples" articulates a theological anthropology in which holiness is embodied, participatory, and ecclesial. Within this framework, the honour accorded to saints and their bodily remains is not an arbitrary devotional accretion but a corollary of the Incarnation itself. If God has entered material flesh and sanctified human nature in Christ, then matter cannot be excluded from the economy of salvation. Relics, in this sense, function not as autonomous sources of divine power but as sacramental signs that symbolically mediate divine grace.

The analysis has also demonstrated that Damascene's doctrine of relic veneration becomes theologically intelligible when reframed within a symbolic and sacramental grammar rather than a magical or sensationalist one. His theology does not displace Christ's unique mediatorship but presupposes it, grounding all saintly honour in participatory union with God. When interpreted in this way, the charge of idolatry- central to classical Protestant critique- is significantly weakened, though not entirely neutralized. Legitimate theological concerns remain regarding devotional excess, commercialization, and the instrumentalization of sacred objects. These

dangers, however, appear not as logical consequences of Damascene's theology but as distortions that violate its internal grammar.

From an ecumenical standpoint, this study has argued that Damascene's theology need not function as a confessional imposition. When critically retrieved, it offers a conceptual resource for articulating an embodied vision of Christian holiness that resonates across denominational boundaries. His incarnational logic contributes to contemporary theological debates on embodiment, sacramentality, and ecclesial memory without requiring uniform devotional practices. In this ecumenical horizon, relic veneration can be interpreted not as universally normative but as a symbolic practice that expresses a deeper theological intuition shared across Christian traditions: *that salvation is embodied, that holiness leaves traces in history, and that the communion of saints transcends temporal boundaries.*

The engagement with Protestant and secular objections has further clarified the limits and possibilities of Damascene's doctrine. While modern rationalist frameworks remain skeptical of miraculous claims associated with relics, the theological viability of his position does not depend on empirical verification of such phenomena. Rather, it rests on the coherence of his underlying anthropology and Christology. His theology affirms that salvation is not a disembodied transaction but an embodied transformation that encompasses both soul and body. When reframed within this critical framework, relic veneration emerges not as a pre-modern superstition but as a theological symbol of embodied holiness and ecclesial continuity.

Finally, Damascene's exhortation that believers become 'living monuments' through imitation of the saints reorients veneration from ritual performance towards ethical and spiritual formation. This emphasis situates holiness within a moral horizon accessible to all believers rather than within devotional elitism or mystical exceptionalism. In this respect, his theology offers a constructive resource for contemporary Christian formation by integrating embodiment, memory, and imitation into a coherent vision of sanctity.

In conclusion, St. John Damascene's theology of the veneration of saints and relics remains theologically viable when critically reframed within a sacramental, symbolic, and ecumenical framework. Far from being a devotional anomaly or an archaic curiosity, his incarnational logic offers enduring conceptual resources for contemporary theological reflection on embodiment, holiness, and the communion of saints. While his doctrine cannot be uncritically universalized, it can be retrieved as a disciplined theological grammar for articulating the bodily dimension of salvation and the continuity of divine grace in material reality. In an age marked by disembodied spirituality, secular reductionism, and theological fragmentation, Damascene's theology thus invites renewed reflection on the embodied character of Christian hope and the enduring relevance of sanctity within the life of the Church.

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