
ICON – THE RELATION BETWEEN SUBSTANCE AND BEAUTY[†]

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Abstract

The icon is generally watched as an object, but it is more than a simple object of cult. The analysis of its profound significance can't be entirely clarified. Its mission consists of making the believers communicating with God, knowing Its Holy Spirit better.

In this paper, I try to bring into discussion the problem of iconoclasm during the centuries, without getting in too many historical details; I emphasized the confusions created by this ideology and I try to distinguish between substance and spirit.

The emotion felt in front of the icon can't be described and is not connected with the contemplation of the artistic image represented in it. There is no doubt that the technique and the tradition of the Byzantine icon, appear in the image icon, next to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Fathers created the Christian art as an illustration of the Church's teachings, so that the icon is not only a simple cultic accessory, it doesn't have as unique purpose the endearment of the cultic houses. The icon is a testimony of the Orthodox faith, full of a profound dogmatic character. Carrying a dogmatic message, the icon has always had the role of guiding man towards God and offering more accessible and understandable models.

Keywords: graven face, enlighten, acheiropietos, iconoclasm, beauty, transcendental message, Deity

Motto: "The ideal embodiment of the symbol is the icon, this holly object that allows Heaven to act in the real world" (Florin Florea, The symbol and the icon)

1. About the icon

Nobody can totally explain the wonder of the icon, the same way nobody can understand Deity. The icon represents God's transcendental representations, so we should see it as a symbol and not only as a religious or an artistic object,

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because the first cause of icons' denigration was precisely this misunderstanding of the religious images and of their iconographic significance.

"What the word says, the image reveals us in silence...", "what we heard, we saw", say the Holy Fathers of the Church, when meeting at the Seventh Ecumenical Synod [1]; its intention was to clarify the importance and the necessity of icons as object of cult and as carriers of God's Son.

The icon goes beyond the physical barrier given by the object, it touches the human soul, 'it does not see' the obstacles of the body, it gets inside, touches our heart; it's not an imitation of beauty, it's Beauty Itself, which comes from inside to outside and not the opposite way. It is similar to God's Light that "turns into light those it enlightens", as Saint Simeon says [2]. In front of our eyes is not only the icon, it is in front of the eyes of our mind, it is inside us, into our soul, it helps us to open the eyes of our mind to ourselves, towards the spiritual side of life, towards the Creator of All who brings comfort and help. The icon has in it so many holy feelings that it is beyond any understanding and substance.

The way some Christians consciously refuse the 'Light' in which 'we are able to see the Light', is unconceivable for those who, for at least once in their life, prayed to God, standing in front of an icon. It is as if you liked the air could enter your house without opening the window. How is possible for you to see the Light of God standing in the dark day by day? If we had been born without the 'light' inside of us, we wouldn't need it, but we are meant to be 'the sons of Light' and we can't live in darkness, sin and pain with 'closed eyes'. The emotion felt standing in front of the icon can't be described and it's not at all connected with the contemplation of the artistic image presented there. It's not the same feeling you might have contemplating a famous painting, analyzing its technique or the colours, a feeling that touches first the physical eye and after that the spiritual one. It is exactly the opposite. The icon goes directly to the soul and only then we are able to look at it and appreciate it as an artistic image.

In the Orthodox icon, the human face is painted as it was originally created, at the beginning of the world. Every icon represents an *archetypon*, the prototype of human being. Here and only here, the human body is set free of the physical, time and space laws. Thus reduced to its initial, original forms and characteristics, the human face lives forever and is similar to God who used Himself as a model.

2. Icon and iconoclasm

In the history of Christianity, both in the East and West, the veterotestamentary influences and the confusion created between the worship of images and the veneration of images, provoked, during the first centuries, attitudes and sporadic episodes of iconomahy (the destruction and the mockery of the icons; it comes from *eikon* = face and *mahe* = fight) or iconoclasm (etymologically speaking, the iconoclasm means the destruction of icons and comes from the Greek words *eikon*, appearance, icon and *klasma* = to destroy, to ruin) [3]; that's why during many centuries, it had been adopted an extreme

opposition regarding the representation of human faces and the veneration of the images, because both of them – the image and what it represents – were inseparable, getting to the extremes: the incapacity of making the distinction between the icon and what it really represents.

The first followers of Christ were sceptical about the ‘idols’- and it was considered as being an idol [4], everything that was larger than the frame of ‘the spiritual cult’, an instrument the new communities used to say good bye to the paganism that surrounded them. The roman catacombs contain symbols that have a biblical origin: the noahitic dove, the pelican, the shepherd, the fish – together with the famous acronym ICHTYS, sending to the sentence: ‘Jesus Christ, the Son of God, The Saviour’ and some mural paintings, as well. The real cult of the icons managed to impose in the 4th and 5th centuries due to two factors: the liberation of Christianity which, once exposed to the public, needed a pedagogical message, accessible to the uneducated ones and the development of hagiography which, as a new successful literary genre, generated an iconography dedicated to the holy martyrs and the confessors from the prosecution period.

If initially, before icons, the Christians used to treat every object following the principle of the second commandment from the Decalogue (“Shall not make graven image...” - Exodus 20.4, Deuteronomy 5.8), refusing the figurative representations, beginning with the 3rd century, in Egypt, Syria and Sinai, the cult of the icon flourished step by step, which had as argument both its mediator role between God and Man and its pedagogical function. At that time, the difference between icon and idol seemed to be quite clear because the believers worshiped the representation and not the painting. But the distinction became uncertain in the 6th century when, next to the icons, it appeared a number of various figurative images belonging to some icons ‘that were not made by human’ (acheropoete). They were considered ‘to make miracles’ and they were given miraculous powers; the believers wanted to have them in order to feel the presence of the one who represented it, especially in Orient and in Byzantine Italy. This concept has in its centre two portraits, Christ and His Mother. The wrong understanding of these symbolical images unfortunately led to idolatry, charged with a form of fanaticism here and there, reminding us of paganism. That’s why it appeared this necessity of clarifying the cult of icon.

There is one magnificent icon made in Church but it is ‘acheiropoetes’. It represents the face of Christ painted in a miraculous way, without any human touch, known under the name of ‘The Holly Face’. Except the acheiropoietos type of icon, the other icons use the symbols in order to reproduce the divine realities of Heaven. The painter of icons, zogaphos had a very difficult task. And he still has it. It is impossible for him to paint with his hands, using perishable materials such as oils, ink and colours, the realities which exist only up in the Heaven and they are eternal. For getting an image, a closer one to the divine Universe if possible, the painter has only one way: the usage of symbols. On other words, he has to make a superior reality be present by the help of an indirect method because this kind of reality cannot be noticed in a direct way.

Dogmatically, the Christological controversies ended in the 7th century. During the first seven centuries of its existence, the Church defended the essential truth which represents the basis of our redemption: the truth of Divine Embodiment. It has protected it little by little, formulating successively various aspects of teachings concerning Jesus Christ – God and Human – offering to the world the most exact possible definitions, meant to destroy any incorrect interpretation. But when Church finally managed to eradicate each heresy, meaning all those partial attacks against different aspects of Christological doctrine, a general fight against the entire ensemble of Orthodox teachings was launched. The war against the icon began. Thus, one of the most terrible heresies came into light: the iconoclasm from the 8th and the 9th century.

No doubt that once the cult of the icons spread, the abuses grew up too and the popular faith was not always free of those abusive usages of icons. Some Christians overreacted in their desire of adorning the Church, thinking that it was enough for getting redemption. Saint Amfilohie of Iconium had foreseen this aspect since the 4th century. On the other hand, there were some ways of worshipping the holly images which resembled with profanation. Asterie of Amasie tells that, in the 7th century, the embroiled images of the saints were on the ceremony clothes of the members belonging to the Byzantine aristocracy. In Alexandria, men and women used to walk on the streets wearing clothes embroiled with holly images [5].

An excessive veneration of icons was met even in the current practices that took place in Church. Thus, the icons were often taken as baptize godmothers or godfathers or as monastic godfathers. There were even more curious practices: some priests used to scrape the colours from the icons and mix them with the Holly Gifts; they offered the mixture to the believers as if the Body and the Blood of God should have been completed with something holly. This practice reminds of another offence: the habit of drinking the oil from the oil lamps that had been lit at the icons or at the holly relics. Sometimes the believers perceived the veneration of icons in a too literal way: they celebrated less the person and more the image. All these came closer to magic or looked like decadent forms of paganism. Such attitudes deeply intrigued some believers who were not very close to Orthodoxy; even worse, some of them got to the final refusal of the icons. Next to these errors concerning the attitude towards the icons, there were also scandalous elements carried inside of the images. The historic truth was often frauded. Saint Augustine says that some artists used to represent Christ in an arbitrary way, from his own imagination; the same practice is often performed nowadays. Some images shocked the believers with their refined sensuality which was completely inappropriate for the holiness of the person represented. Images of this kind made the ordinary person have doubts about the holiness of the icon or even about its necessity inside of Church. Even worse, they offered to the iconoclasts a reputable weapon against the holly art in general. To them, art was incapable of showing God' glory and the one of His Saints, of the spiritual world. Art appeared as a real blasphemy and its presence in Church could be considered a concession made in favour of

paganism. They wondered: “ How can it be present, using the mean techniques of Greek art, the Holy Mother of Jesus Christ, who got God inside her tummy completely, who is beyond the Heaven and more glorified than the angels?” or “How is it possible not to feel ashamed when showing by the help of a pagan art those who must rule together with Christ, in order to defend His Throne, to judge the world and look like the face of His glory, while the Scripture tells us that the entire world was not worthy of them?”

Could the ordinary believers understand the subtle theological distinction made between worship and veneration with which the theologians defended themselves against the reproach according to which the cult of icons was a form of worshipping the physical faces? The defenders of icons, the theologians and the priests had the duty of reminding and explaining all over again to both laics and monks that the icons had to be honoured. The only one that could be worshiped was Christ, the One represented in the icon. There were several sects and heresies that had their contribution to the attitude regarding the cult of the icons. They were influenced by the teachings which said that the Holy Embodiment had been nothing else but an illusion, something surreal. The Paulicens who didn't honour the sign of the cross, did not have the cult of Holy Mother and of Saints either, everything was not honest 'in spirit and truth'. They took from Manihets the dualist teaching which said that the substance had to be despised because it had been created by a bad and inferior demiurge. Just because Christ hadn't had a real physical body, He couldn't have any kind of representation. The Messalins from Armenia also rejected the cult of icons and several monophysite sects which were active especially on the oriental territories of the Empire, thought the painting of Christ's face on the icons was quite impossible because, according to their belief, the human spirit was 'swallowed' by the holly one and thus, the latter could not be known and painted.

The lack of education and culture of some believers and the trade with holly objects determined, in the first case, the total worship of icons and, in the second one, the rebellion of many Christians. At that time, the Judaists and the Muslims accused the Christians of idolatry, so some emperors started the fight against the cult of icons. The truth is that until the end of the 8th century, Church manifested for not too many times against the holly images and the enemies of icons belonged to the educated Byzantine classes while, among the ordinary people, the icons were the representation of popular piety.

Saint Gregory the Great, an important iconist affirmed: “what writing offers to the reader, the painting offers to the uneducated. The ignorant can see what has to come, those who are not able to read the letters, can read the painting.” [6] The ideal of beauty was entirely rejected as a deep understanding level inside the masses, as if the divine beauty were accessible only to the 'chosen' ones, only to the educated people. God could be acceded to through feelings and intellect.

3. The importance of the 7th Ecumenical Synod

At the end of the 7th century (692), a Trullan Synod (in trullo) takes place where, for the very first time, the problem of holy images is brought into discussion and the balance between the images used by Church and the symbolical images is established. Here, after the historical analysis of the acheropoete types of icons, several Christian models are legislated, such as Theotokos or Hodighitria, the first models which are not made by human and containing the image of Holy Mother and assigned to Saint Luke. In the same synod, in trullo claims that there should be given up to the model of Lamb (which appeared in the 5th and 6th century), the representation of an Eucharistic and eschatological sacrifice, because the other images are enough, emphasizing the Syrian representation of Christ's face. Saint John Damaskin (675 – 749) who was at that time the delegate of the Patriarch of Jerusalem wrote three pleadings in order to defend the holy images against the Saracens and the Byzantine iconoclasts. These three pleadings are philosophical, theological and spiritual meditations about icons and their cult, of a great importance. They clearly showed the firm position adopted by the Patriarch of Jerusalem regarding the cult of icons, including the exclusion of the iconoclastic mistakes.

The cult of icons is based on the Embodiment of God' Son Itself and Saint John Damaschin shows that the iconoduly is not idolatry because there must be made a clear difference between worship (latreia) which is directed to God only and the profound veneration (proskynesis) which is shown to everything that has a holy character but it is not God. This can't be represented because he is pure spirit. Christ, the Virgin Mary, angels and saints showed themselves as substance. The Old Testament blames indeed the idolatry and not the representation of something that might have a holy character (for example, the cherubims from the Arch of the Law). By using the icons, we talk to the prototype, we learn and memorize facts from the prototype's life, we strengthen our devotion. Through the holy icon, the spirit gets down on us, the icon being the mediator between us and the prototype.

The seventh Ecumenical Synod dogmatized the honour of the holy icons, showing that icons were not made for worshipping (this is meant to God only) but for kissing, censing and lighting candles, as a form of profound veneration for the person painted there and not the icon itself.

It's presented here an invincible argument for sustaining the icons, described by John Damaschin: "It is pure madness and a lack of faith to represent Deity." For the same reason, in the Old Testament the usage of icons was not common. But when God, in His immense generosity and mercy, turned into a real man for our redemption and because man, neither in the way He showed to Abraham with a human face nor in the way he showed to the prophets, but He became a man with material and real face – he lived on the Earth, He joined men, He made miracles, He suffered, He was crucified, He resurrected, He rose and all these really happened and were seen by people; so

when all these had been done, His face was painted on the icon to remind us about Him and acquire new teachings we, who hadn't been there then, because we should have God's blessing without seeing but hearing and believing. But, because not everybody is educated and not everybody enjoys reading, the parents decides that all these should be painted on icons, presented as bravery acts in order to remind them without any hesitation. Indeed, for many times, not carrying God's suffering into our mind but watching the icon with Christ's crucification, we remember of his passion, and falling into our knees, we started praying. We do not pray to the substance but to the One who is presented in the icon, as we do not pray either to the substance that makes the Gospel Book or to the substance that makes the cross but to the image of cross. So, what is the difference between the cross that carries the face of God on it and the one that does not have it? As I said, the honour given by those who suffer together to the best ones is the proof of love shown to the owner of the community and the honour shown to the icon is actually directed to the one presented there. The tradition of making the sign of cross in front of the icons is not written as it is also unwritten the making the sign of cross watching the East, making the sing in front of a cross and many other similar cases [...] because the honour we show to the face goes to the prototype (according to Saint Basil the Great: *About the Holly Spirit* 18, 45; Pg 32, 149) and the one who makes the sing in front of the icon, prays to the person painted in it [7].

How beautifully and explicitly Saint Joan Damaschin teaches us about respecting the icons not as a lifeless substance but as a carrier of a goodness message, as an enlighten pathfinder of the passions for Christ.

The icon is a powerful enemy. It was considered a violation of the divine commandments, an object for the peoples' opium and now, destroyer of the fundamental rights and freedom. The influence of the iconoclast ideology unfortunately goes beyond the borders of heresy from the 8th and 9th centuries. It can be talked about a permanence of the iconoclasm, which was manifested under various forms during the centuries; as examples that can be mentioned are the Albigens from the medieval France the Russian Judas of the 9th century and the Protestants. Unfortunately, by not following the teachings of the Holly Fathers, they became excessive; one of these excesses was the total rejection of the icons, of painting the holly house and, in some cases, even of the cross. In order to strengthen their position, the protestant theologians and some scholars got to use the arguments and the reasons of the Byzantine iconoclasts, thinking that they are well structured and firm. That is why, even nowadays, we have enough arguments for honouring the icon got from the Holly Parents of Orthodoxy, as a way of loving God, there are many Christian cults that reject the idea of icon, considering that it is not worthy to honour what is seen as substance.

4. Icon and symbol

The icons make us change our mind from terrestrial matters to the heavenly ones. Saint John Damascine wrote: “by the help of icons we are led to the contemplation of what is divine and spiritual” [7, p. 155]. By keeping the memory of those painted in the icons, we are inspired to imitate them.

Saint Grigore of Nissa told about his inability of going by the icon of Abraham who sacrificed Isaac ‘without dropping tears’. In a commentary to these words, at the 7th Ecumenical Synod, it was said: “If, as a Doctor, the image was to him and made him cry, the more it will bring penitence and do well to the poor and uneducated one.” [1, p. 38]

It is true, the icon is an image but not an earthly image. It is a teandric image, a ‘divine-human’ one, partly heavenly, partly terrestrial. It has a dual nature, as the adjective teandric indicates, made of the words *theos* which means ‘God’ and *aner*, which means ‘Human’.

Even if it belonged to a saint, the picture, the terrestrial image can’t be used as icon. The canons of the orthodox iconography definitely forbid it. Even if one day the picture of a saint is discovered, it can replace the icon of the venerated saint. The picture is an exclusively earthly image of man. On the contrary, the icon is the pure and integral image of man, with all his earthly and heavenly characteristics.

In an icon, the human image is ‘undressed’ by the solid and mortal substance which is in the ordinary existence. And it is fair to be ‘undressed’ this way and reduced to its original lines because the saints the icon represents are humans who, in spite of their body made of flesh and blood, had lived as angels without substance. In the icon, the human face and the body are relieved, purified, washed of all the clay, all the dust, all the earthly and solid materials. In the icon, the human face becomes clean and similar to the human prototype. During his earthly existence, the saint can’t be the way the icon represents him. There is no pure water in nature. Any water, even the purest one is mixed with salts, gases and other materials which are not common for the water. The same happens when it comes about the human face. In life, as the drinkable water, this face of man is not pure. It’s burdened. It’s mingled. It contains all kind of impurities which were added later to its original nature and which have no connection with this. An icon does not represent the reality of our life here on Earth. Each icon is a kind of window opened to the sky and the image we often see painted there is a real coming from up above. The human being, the figures of saints painted in the icon belong for sure to those who lived on Earth, we recognize them easily but we don’t recognize them by their body. Now, the saints are celestial creatures and in heaven nobody can be recognized by the body.

We can make some comparisons between the iconoclast period and the communist one, in our country or in any other one of socialist origin, excepting the martyrdom as a form of punishment. Let’s not forget that the one hundred years old churches were demolished and the icons in schools were replaced by

the portraits of ‘the leaders’, the same way the icons and the mural paintings were replaced by the portraits of the emperors ...

If Saint John Damascine and then Theodor clarified the cult of icon, emphasizing the fact that it sends to another reality and not to the closest one (like a character in a picture who brings us closer to the represented person), bringing arguments against and for iconoduly on the basis of Christ’s embodiment. It seems there still are some positive consequences of this mourning period. Now the iconoclasts’ arguments are destroyed by the patristic ones; once in a while, this heresy is brought to light and into discussion because, from that moment Church dissolved, it got separated from the state and so, the ordinary man got to have two distinct lives, an earthly and a heavenly one. Thus, the access to the cultic life and to the religious information is open but we are unable for many times to find the right way for getting our own answers about some dogmas of Church. If until the iconoclasm, there weren’t too many people who could get the access to the information about cult and Church, nowadays, it seems that the information goes to the same emptiness concerning the understanding of the own religion. Many people claim even today that the icon is ‘a graven face’ and those who venerate the icon are heretics, that God is able to hear and understand us without icons...but they are not for serving Him but us, because we are the ones who can’t go further the substance and we get limited to it, we compare to it and can use it in order to understand.

How is it possible to live again the moments before the iconoclasm when there are some people who do not make the difference between to venerate and to adore, getting to worship the objects of cult, the holy relics or tear parts of them, thinking the wonder is made by substance and not by saint? Certainly, the years of religious infirmity lived during the communism period draw us back with hundred of years, living again the confusion which led to the iconoclast heresy. As the Holy Parents of Church say, ‘only the Goodness dogmas offers the right conditions to that that wants to get redemption’, so we have to keep intact these orders for keeping clean the image of icons and saints.

5. Conclusions

The emotion felt in front of the icon can’t be described and is not connected with the contemplation of the artistic image represented there. There is no doubt that the technique and the tradition of the Byzantine icon appear in the image next to the Holy Spirit.

It’s not the same emotion you might have contemplating a famous painting, analyzing its technique and colors, feeling that touches first the physical eye and then the spiritual one, it’s exactly the opposite way, the icon goes right to the soul, and then we are able to watch it and appreciate it as an artistic image.

Let us open our soul to love and get by the help of the icon to the place where the material limits given by time, space and substance disappear in front of God’s mystery.

Let us offer the place of honor to God's creation and the special place he has in God's human being, praying with faith to enlighten us always in order to be capable to choose the way of good and beauty we started on when we were born.

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