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# PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF ICON PAINTING

**Natalia Dmitrievna Kotovchikhina<sup>1</sup>,  
Natalia Evgenievna Shafazhinskaya<sup>1</sup>, Darya Mikhailovna Kapustina<sup>2</sup>,  
Irina Zabolotskaia<sup>3\*</sup>, Viktor Mikhailovich Shaklein<sup>4</sup> and  
Natalia Grigorievna Bondarenko<sup>5</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> *K.G. Razumovsky Moscow State University of Technologies and Management (First Cossack University), 73 Zemlyanoy Val str., Moscow, 109004, Russia*

<sup>2</sup> *Moscow Aviation Institute, 4 Volokolamskoe Highway, Moscow, 125993, Russia*

<sup>3</sup> *First Sechenov Moscow State Medical University, 19/1 Bolshaya Pirogovskaya str., Moscow, 119146, Russia*

<sup>4</sup> *Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), 6 Miklukho-Maklaya Street, Moscow, 117198, Russia*

<sup>5</sup> *Pyatigorsk Institute (branch) of the North-Caucasus Federal University, 56 Sorok let Oktyabrya Ave, Pyatigorsk, 357502, Russia*

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## Abstract

An icon is a sacred work of art that is both material and spiritual, based on the cultural experience acquired by the Christian community over two thousand years of Christian civilization. This is the uniqueness and universality of the icon in the Christian concept of knowing and worshipping God. The authors analyse such philosophical foundations of icon painting as transcendentality, metaphysic and ontological nature, and anthropologism. The material and spiritual nature of the icon is determined, the theological foundations of icon painting are identified including the observance of the canons and mysticism.

*Keywords:* iconodulism, transcendentality, metaphysicality, ontological nature, anthropologism

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## 1. Introduction

The relevance of the topic of the study is determined by the importance of researching and revealing the philosophical and theological foundations of icon painting. Icon painting, in the modern sense of this term, appeared in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and some still believe that this area remains insufficiently studied. The topic of the study is also actualized by the fact that the phenomenon of icons is of considerable interest to many scholars, in particular, philosophers, religious scholars, theologians, historians, as well as art experts and masters of sacred art [1-5].

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\*Corresponding author, e-mail: irina.k.zabolotskaya@mail.ru

One can learn about iconology, iconography, and stylistics of ancient and modern icons from the scholarly works by V.V. Bychkov [6, 7] who analysed the historical, art history, as well as the philosophical and theological foundations of icon painting. The scholar studied the great difficulties faced by the Universal Church in approving sacred images as a visual doctrinal part of theology. Historical liturgical and theological aspects are revealed in the works by A. Kartashev [8], I.K. Yazykova [9], H. Belting [10], N.E. Aldoshina [11] and others. Ancient Byzantine iconography, in particular, its influence on the art of Kievan Rus, was studied by Y.G. Bobrov [12], O.S. Popova [13], G. Gîrbea [14].

However, the aspects related to the philosophical and theological foundations of icon painting remain underexplored. The purpose of the article is to analyse such philosophical foundations of icon painting as transcendentality, metaphysicality, ontological nature and anthropologism, as well as theological foundations of icon painting, including observance of canons and mysticism.

## **2. Philosophical foundations of icon painting - transcendentality, metaphysicality, ontological nature and anthropologism of an icon**

An icon is not only a work of art that conveys the style of an era but also a spiritual landmark, transcendental light that helps a person to communicate with God. Therefore, when creating a canonical *transcendental* icon [15], traditional symbolism is used, which has always been the dominant means in sacred art. One should note that the Latin word *transcendere* means to step over. Two philosophical concepts originate from this word: transcendent, that is, such that cannot be cognized, since it lies beyond the boundaries of human knowledge; and transcendental which recognizes the importance of knowing what lies outside the limits of our senses. The excessive symbolism of the icon, formed with the help of conventions and deformations, according to P. Florensky [16], reveals transcendence in the icon, that is, the unknowability of the depicted God's world, the delimitation of contemplation and human experience.

At the same time, V.V. Bychkov defines the philosophical basis of the icon as transcendental [7, p. 473]. These definitions are based on the fact that there are God's mysteries in the icon, which can be cognized both a priori (that is, acquired through faith) and a posteriori (that is, obtained based on experience). God did not hide anything from man but revealed to man that part of the secrets that relate to personal salvation and humanity as a whole. Therefore, the icon, through its transcendental nature, should, as the word of God does in the Bible, reveal God's secrets and convey them to all Christians.

The transcendentality of the icon entails a high level of unity of contemplation, thinking and experience. One should note that mere superficial contemplation leads to passivity, alienation and indifference, and thinking and the acquisition of experience lead to rationalism. Together, these aspects create an active, productive nature of the relationship between God and Man (creator and work). Thus, the cognition of what lies beyond perception and experience is

man's attempt to enter the nature of God's mysteries. The greatest secret is Incarnation, when the almighty God, by His holy and sovereign will, became a man embodied in Jesus Christ (the second person of the Holy Trinity) and let himself be cognized [17]. Moreover, when God's closest disciples, the apostles, did not understand the meaning of the biblical texts, God activated their knowledge by telling them parables. Thus, God gave examples of transcendental logic, introducing a priori knowledge into the a posteriori being of man. After Christ, the Church, as well as the icon have done this work, which is an important tool for cognizing God and His revelations [6, p. 57].

In view of this, the icon is also metaphysical [10, p. 241]. This is its very valuable and important feature that distinguishes the icon from other artworks, for example from a portrait. Metaphysics means a concept that exists outside of Nature, outside of Physics. There are many designations for this term in Philosophy, but in Theology, Metaphysics has a specific meaning: it is the high spiritual world of God's being. The Risen Lord and His saints, who are the objects of images on icons, exist in this world. In other words, the metaphysical image in Christianity is highly spiritual. The question is how an icon painter can achieve this supernaturalness through completely natural things - images of the visible world and painting materials, with the obligatory choice of the correct color scheme [18]. The medieval icon painter solved this issue by deforming the visible space [11, p. 124].

Boris Rauschenbach described and analysed in detail the spatial deformations of the ancient masters of icon painting, in particular, Russian [19]. The methods of spatial constructions in religious painting described by the scholar illustrate the desire of icon painters to achieve the metaphysics of the icon through a certain deformation. Naturally, this is one of the manifestations of symbolism. However, at the beginning of the formation of Theology, icons presented the beauty and perfection of Nature created by God as a reflection of the Paradise in which Adam and Eve lived before the Fall. Therefore, the Higher spiritual world should be conveyed not as an inferior version of the visible world, but, on the contrary, as incomparably better compared to the visible world.

Metaphysics in icons appear as the source of existence, as an eternal, unchanging and perfect given. The metaphysical in icons is a truly spiritual nature, elevated above nature, where shape, colour, line, plane and space are naturally perfect.

Light and colour are inextricably linked with the metaphysics of divine light in icon painting. Thus, in the 'Corpus Areopagiticum', attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, light and colour are inseparable concepts. This theory was supplemented by John of Damascus' sermons (first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century) [20].

The next philosophical category, the ideal, is closely linked with Metaphysics. In the theological and iconological understanding, the ideal is not at all derived from the material [9]. The difference between the spiritual ideality and the earthly, material one, was clearly outlined by Paul the Apostle, "What no

eye has seen, nor ear heard, ..., what God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2.9). It is not explained nor specified what exactly is prepared by God but it is obvious that it is unmatched in the material world. This is also reminiscent of the New Jerusalem (that is, the world changed by God), which is mentioned in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of the Revelation of John the Apostle. The ideal is expressed in the icon primarily through a golden halo around the head of a saint and through a golden background. This is an image of an ideal space, a kind of projection of the heavenly onto the earthly [9].

The icon is *ontological* since the icon indicates the possibility of cognition by the mind of the primary causes of being. In Philosophy, Ontology is a branch that explores the higher foundations of all that exists, the sources of existence, the driving forces of the Universe. However, Christian ontology points to God as the primary source of all that exists. The beginning of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, is classically ontological. Also, in the Old and New Testaments, one can find many passages that point to God as the creator of man. The stimulation of the super-sensible reserves of man, the flight of ideas to the higher forms of being of the spirit make the ontology of the icon a necessary and defining feature - the cognition of the nature of God through the ontology of the icon [5]. Therefore, the ontological foundations of the Bible organically entered icon-creation.

One of the main features of the icon is its *anthropologism*. In Christianity, the philosophical category of anthropologism represents the most consistent, most humane concept of man. The category is different from both ancient (Socratic) and classical (Feuerbach) anthropologism [21]. It is noteworthy that human-centrism is inherent in many philosophical schools, but only in Christian anthropology it is complete. Socrates placed man at the centre of cognition. Classical enlightenment philosophy viewed man as the pinnacle of the pyramid of Nature. Christian anthropology argues that the basis of the Universe is God, and man is the perfect Creation of God. So perfect that at a certain stage God himself became a man [21, p. 57].

Icon painting, which firmly holds the view of creationism, conveys the very essence of Christian anthropology in the artistic form [21, p. 87]. If in some non-Christian religions there is a total prohibition to depict a person in temples (for example, Jewish synagogues, Islamic mosques), then in the interiors of Catholic and Orthodox Christian churches there are many images of man. These are not objects of worship but Christian supporters of one almighty God.

Moreover, in the iconostases of churches of the Eastern rite, the idea of the Incarnation triumphs: Lord incarnate exists next to His saints. God and the saints inhabit the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus, the human ascends to the divine, and the divine, in turn, does not ignore but sanctifies the human. That is why the anthropologism of the icon is not identical with the deification of man; it has nothing to do with either the pantheism of Eastern religions or the polytheism of other religions. The icons of the Christian church vividly and expressively convey the Gospel idea: the centre and the primary cause of the Universe is God (therefore, Christological icons are located in the centre of the iconostasis), and

the centre of God's creativity is man [1, p. 157]. The other elements of sacred art in the temple (carving on iconostases, ornaments, embroidery) emphasize this deep complementarity of theocentricism and anthropologism. The more perfect are the ornamental parts of icon painting and all the decorative accompaniment of icons from an artistic point of view, the greater the influence the icon has on believers.

### **3. Theological foundations of icon painting - observance of canons**

The first canonical justification for icon painting was the Trullan Council of the Byzantine Church (691-692), which adopted a decree (Canon 82), which put an end to the images of the Saviour widespread until then in the form of symbolic signs and allegorical figures (lamb, Orpheus, Pelican, good shepherd, fish, grapevine, pigeon, Phoenix, Dolphin, etc.). The Council established for the depiction of icons the historical image of Jesus Christ as a Man who fully preserved His nature of God, but at the same time acquired a second nature - a carnal man. The Council in Trullo established that with the birth of Jesus Christ, mankind got to know God personally, observed Him for 33 years. God himself left two of his authentic images on the fabrics (on the towel of the Edessian King Abgar V and the towel of Saint Veronica), and His Mother, the Virgin Mary, was described by Luke the Evangelist. (The third authentic image of the Lord Jesus Christ is considered to be the shroud from the Turin Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist in Italy). Consequently, the Trullan Council officially introduced the extremely important dogma of Christianity about the incarnation of God into the practice of iconodulism and icon painting: instead of symbols and allegories, the Lord should have been depicted on icons in human form [8, p. 112].

Subsequently, specific plots of icons and the basic rules for their depiction were enshrined in the acts of the Seventh Ecumenical (Second Nicaean) Council in 787 [8, p. 95]. The reasons for iconodulism are given in Hermeneia, "We borrowed the painting of holy icons not only from the holy fathers but also from saint apostles and even from Christ himself... We worship not paints and works of art, as the enemies of our Church slander, but our Lord Jesus Christ who is in Heaven. For the veneration of the icon passes on to the foretype." [Dionysius of Fournia, *Erminiya, ili Nastavlenie v zhivopisnom iskusstve (Herminia or Homilies in art)*, <http://etextread.ru/Book/Read/46331?nP=170>]

After the victory over iconoclasm and the establishment of a holiday in honour of this event (843), the Byzantines began a deep reform of all sacred art to implement the decisions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council regarding icons (787) and the ideas of the greatest theologians-iconologists of early medieval Byzantium - John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite [8, p. 214]. The Reverend Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council like Saints John and Theodore, substantiated the very idea of iconodulism, its deep ontological connection with the fundamental dogmas of Christianity, but did not go into

details of how icons should be created. That is, the saints acted more as iconologists than as iconographers [20].

The inevitability of observing the canons in sacred art is, first of all, postulated in Eastern Christianity, the Byzantine rite. Once this finiteness of canons was inherent in both ritual systems in Christianity - Latin and Byzantine. However, after the Great Schism (1054), the ritual differences between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches also affected the concept of sacred art. In the era of Proto-Renaissance and Renaissance, new rules began to form in the sacred art of the Roman Catholic Church. Along with the traditional Byzantine icon painting which bore new fruit on Italian soil (Cimabue, Giotto, Duccio), highly spiritual Religious painting (Correggio, Bellini, Titian) also develops. In the art of the Greek and other Orthodox churches, one continued to adhere to the decrees of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787, taking into account the lessons of the tragic 117-year era of iconoclasm (726-843) and the canons of iconography created in the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries [22].

Master painters of the Constantinople school, based on the iconology of the Church Fathers, developed practical rules for icon painting, that is, practical iconography, and formalized them in the form of a kind of handwritten textbooks called *Hermeneias* in Greek [<http://etextread.ru/Book/Read/46331?nP=170>]. Sending them around the Byzantine state and beyond, where icon painting arose, the capital's masters created unprecedented popularity of Byzantine icons in the Middle East, Transcaucasia, the Balkans, Russia, Italy, Sicily, Africa, on the islands of the Mediterranean Sea over the next centuries (after the 9<sup>th</sup> century). Many of these *Hermeneias* have disappeared, and those that have survived from ancient times in the Athos monasteries were collected by the Greek monk Dionysius of Fournas and published in the 18<sup>th</sup> century [23]. Thus, the canons of the icon were created which included three provisions: iconography (the circle of saints allowed to be depicted on icons), stylistics (artistic means of painting saints) and technique (materials that should be used to paint saints). These canons were passed on to countries that adopted Christianity of the Byzantine rite [23].

The canon divides the icons with the holy figure of the Saviour into two groups: those that reflect the earthly life of the Lord, and those that represent him as the King of Heaven or a judge. The first group is the six Lord's icons of the Christmas tier of the iconostasis. As for the second group, the Byzantine canon established the following images of the Lord: Almighty (or Pantocrator in Greek), Christ the King, Christ the Great High Priest and Holy Trinity [2, p. 184].

The Eastern Church distinguishes two icons of the Trinity: three angels who appeared on a mission to Abraham and Sarah (the Old Testament Trinity), and God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (the New Testament Trinity). In the Western Church, the icon of Christ the Judge of the World was extremely popular in the Middle Ages (an example is the images on the tympanes of Romanesque and Gothic temples) [11, p. 102].

The researcher of Byzantine iconography I. Menelaou identifies seven iconographic versions of Jesus Christ in Byzantine art, designed to confirm the most important dogmatic postulates of Christology: 1) Saviour Not-Made-by-Hands; 2) the Ancient of Days, or Sabaoth; 3) Saviour the Infant, or Emmanuel; 4) Saviour the Great High Priest; 5) Saviour-Angel of the Great Council; 6) Saviour Almighty; 7) Saviour the Most Merciful, or Soter [20].

Here it is worth remembering the icon of the Saviour Not-Made-by-Hands, which holds the first place in all Christian iconography, for Jesus Christ, during His earthly life, at least twice left His own image on two different fabrics: on the towel of King Abgar V of Edessa and the towel of Saint Veronica. Both images are similar to the face of the Lord on the Turin shroud, therefore there are certain reasons to consider the towels of Abgar and Veronica as authentic images of the Saviour at the moment of the completion of His earthly mission [12, p. 73]. The Church adopted these two images, shrouded in legends, as a model in depicting the Saviour. Naturally, the originals of Abgar and Veronica's towels were not preserved but with their help, a Church tradition was formed which was equally used by theologians in the dogma of the incarnation of God, and icon painters when approving the cult of Jesus Christ in icon painting.

The Theotokos theme on the icons of icon painters also meets theological requirements. Byzantine iconology developed seven main versions of the icons of the Virgin Mary, except for six icons from the festive tier: 1) The Intercessor, or Oranta; 2) Our Lady of the Sign, or Panagia or Vlahernitissa; 3) Deesis (the Advocate), or Agiosoritissa; 4) Victorious, or Nicopeia; 5) Our Lady of the Way, or Hodegetria; 6) Virgin of Tenderness, or Eleusa; 7) Assumption of the Virgin, or Assunta [24]. However, less common images of the Holy Virgin are known in Byzantine iconography, for example, when Theotokos plays with the little Jesus, holding him in her arms (Game, or the so-called Leaping), and when she feeds him with her breast (the Nurse, or Galaktotrophousa) [24].

On the example of the iconography of these icons, one can observe an interesting phenomenon, namely the combination of ecclesiology (the study of the Church) into one knot with Christian anthropology (the study of man). The emphasis on a special prayer state and special mercy and meekness in the icons of the Theotokos is a very important theological accent in modern icon painting. Prayer is what God wants from man. Love is what man wants from God and his neighbor. However, these relations are resolved in the icon not verbally (as, for example, in theological treatises), but figuratively: the Virgin Mary represents the human race, Jesus Christ represents the Holy Trinity. Naturally, there is a great power of generalization at work, which can only be achieved by art with its developed methods of metaphors and associations.

To a certain extent, the icon is characterized by *mysticism* [23]. This is the most controversial feature of the icon, for the mystical is characteristic of many non-Christian religions and their art. However, mysticism in Christianity is limited only by the Sacred Mysteries established by the Lord. Each icon reveals a certain God's secret or their combination.

While in the Church, a Christian is aware of the ontological purpose of these actions but can comprehend the mechanism of their implementation (say, the secret of the conception and birth of Christ) only at the mystical level. The very faith of a Christian in something that cannot be proved by the laws of logic is also a mystical act.

Miracle-working icons are endowed with mystical traits since through them the incomprehensible influence of the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit is carried out during healing, salvation from danger and other miracles. There are countless historical facts in the Church that support this. However, all attempts to recognize and explain how this happens are unsuccessful, since this is part of God's creative energy, the laws of which are known only to God himself. Considering this, the icon is endowed with signs of mercy because the icon depicts the Merciful Lord who worked mercy.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Overall, one should note that the philosophical and theological foundations of icon painting go far beyond illustrativeness in relation to the Bible and the history of the Church. The ideal in the icon includes everything that is associated with the eternal and established, and not with the temporary and changeable. Lord, all the saints are eternally existing, unchanging, therefore their ideal is painted on icons. The eternity of God's existence is a pulsation of the necessary and the infinite: the concrete forms of God's Creation change and pass in space and time, and the eternal God's ideal never changes, as if permeating these changing concrete forms. The ideal in the icon reflects the root cause of Creation - the incomprehensible world of the Creator.

An important feature of icon making is the observance of the established canons of sacred art (theory and practice of icon painting) developed by theorists-iconologists and iconographers of the period of iconoclasm. The Byzantine iconographic canon was formed in the teachings of theologians and the work of icon painters after the drama of iconoclasm that shook Byzantium in the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries and made the theologians of Constantinople focus on the icon, its role in the Christian church, and also the method of its creation by icon painters. Icon painting is based on established canonical rules that are part of the theology of icons.

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