



**MCDSARE: 2022**  
**International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the**  
**Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education**

**THE BYZANTINE ICON, A CULMINATION OF ART**  
**– THEOLOGY, SYMBOL AND REALITY**

Professor, PhD. Nicușor TUCĂ,  
“Ovidius” University of Constanta, ROMANIA  
E-mail: tucanicusor@yahoo.com

*Abstract*

The Byzantine icon has a complex language because it comprises true iconic hierophanies or sacred images, with a profound theological symbolism, hard to express. The image and the symbol are two indissoluble realities by which the human spirit is helped to feel and know the mystery of the real presence of God. By means of the symbol, the icon and the liturgical realism, in general, do not contain only the epiphanic anamnesis or the representation of the evangelical and ecclesial events in symbolical portrayals or aesthetic figures, but their very accomplishment, continual topicalization. The Byzantine art is not a discipline annex of Theology, it is rather its practical, and effectively lived, application, the rightly-glorifying faith being the norm of the rightly-glorifying high glorification. Theology is not just word, verbal expression, but also icon, symbolical representation. The Eastern Church had the genius and method of creating the analogy of the celestial and earthly Church in symbols and images; the Christian faith has led to the exceptional cultural creation represented in monuments of architecture and painting. The icon and the symbol are, however, forms of the presence and work of God in and via visible matter.

**Keywords:** icon; symbol; cult; art; reality;

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The image, the symbol and the icon are correlative expressions of the same mystery of the cult dedicated to the Saviour Christ. All these belong to and, through the Holy Spirit, become sources of the revelation of Christ, dates of God and man, indicating the redeeming work of Christ, and His pneumatic presence through the liturgical mystery of the icon. The Byzantine icon has its own language and an inexpressible treasure of theological and symbolic values; meeting of God and man, of the uncreated energies with nature, a convergence or an interpenetration between eternal and ephemeral, and, for this reason, the Byzantine icon has a revelatory and epiphanic value, uniting God with man.

The principal function of the icon, with its rich symbolism, is to “help” God’s presence, to mediate the meeting full of grace with what is described not through subjective visual perception, but



through the objective presence of God. Saint Theodore the Studite highlights the identity between the cult of the icon and the cult of the prototype. “*It is not the essence of the image which we venerate— he says —, but the form of the prototype which is stamped upon it, since the essence of the image is not venerable. Neither is it the material which is venerated, but the prototype is venerated together with the form and not the essence of the image. But if the image is venerated, it has one veneration with the prototype, just as they have the same likeness. Therefore, when we venerate the image, we do not introduce another kind of veneration different from the veneration of the prototype.*” (St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons, Third Refutation of The Iconoclasts*, C 2, p. 103).

Matter, the visible is not just a symbol, separated from grace, occasioning the work of grace, on the contrary it is full of divine power (Dumitru Stăniloae, 1978, p. 21). Hence the presence of grace in the miracle-working icons, which is not a simple symbol, but a plenary reality.

## 2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to investigate the problem of the Byzantine icon, as a culmination of art, but comprising the doctrine, the symbolism and the reality of this teaching of faith, an interdisciplinary analysis being needed in relation to this theme. Saint John of Damascus, who builds the first dogmatic theory of the cult of the icons, gives us a strictly logical definition of the notion of icon. In the broad sense of the word, the icon is *a likeness depicting an archetype, but having some difference from it* (St. John of Damascus, *Treatise I*, 9, p. 25). The icon, therefore, is not identical to its original, but differs from it in something and with something. *An image is therefore a likeness and pattern and impression of something, showing in itself what is depicted; however, the image is certainly not like the archetype, that is, what is depicted, in every respect – for the image is one thing and what it depicts is another – and certainly a difference is seen between them, since they are not identical.*” (St. John of Damascus, *Treatise III*, 16, p. 95). For example, the icon of a man is not identical to the man, since this icon represents only the shape of the body, not also the powers of the soul: the icon does not talk, does not think, does not feel and does not move.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODS

We will highlight the objectives of the research, the work hypotheses and the hierarchy, choosing of the selective bibliography on the topic of the Byzantine icon. The problem of the icon is one fiercely debated in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century. We will prove the value and the importance of the icon focusing on the main arguments developed by Saint John of Damascus and Saint Theodore the Studite.

Using the methods of historical and analytical research we will highlight the dimensions of the icon: a reflection of the teaching of faith, a theology of beauty, and the icon - symbol and reality.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. THEOLOGICAL-HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING THE ICON IN CHRISTIANISM

The Christian culture inaugurates the dogma of divine visibility, well articulated by the Christian theologians and philosophers on the key bedrock of Christ’s Embodiment. However, this dogma was crystallized during a very long period, the issue of the icon triggering an ample theological debate.

The iconoclastic controversy broke out often in Byzantine theology, being intimately connected to Christology. Certain theologians affirm that the iconoclasm did not affect just one doctrinal aspect, as it represents a sum “of all the heresies”, which will try to undermine the whole iconomy of salvation.

Also Saint Theodore the Studite testifies that the iconoclasts are fulfilling the work all the heresies (St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons, First Refutation of The Iconoclasts*, 19, p. 39), bringing as testimony the following statement: “*he falls away far from God and the sheepfold of Christ, because he thinks like the Manicheans and the Valentinians, who babbled heretically that God had dwelt among those on earth only in appearance and fantasy*”. (St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons, Second Refutation of The Iconoclasts*, 49, p. 75).

On the other hand, he considers the teaching of the iconoclasts similar to that of the Acephaloi (a group of monophysite heretics) and Apollinarianists, supporters of Apollinarius, who were affirming the

Neo-Platonic trichotomy, by the denial of the integrity of the human nature of Christ (St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons, Third Refutation of The Iconoclasts*, 23, p. 86). In another passage, he was taking the iconoclasts as similar to Montanists, they declaring that Jesus, the Embodied Logos, did not take on a true human nature but a shape similar to human nature, namely: *a likeness and form of flesh* (St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons. Third Refutation of The Iconoclasts*, 24, p. 87).

The historical research highlights at least three elements that triggered this movement.

1. *The Issue of Religious Culture.* In the Greek-speaking countries, there was already a tradition in which the icon occupied a necessary place in the cult, while the Syrian and Armenian communities, without being hostile to the icons, did not have the tendency of turning them into cult objects, but perceived them only as simple illustrations of the biblical text, namely as purely didactic means.

2. *The Confrontation with Islamism.* After the Arabian conquest of Palestine, Syria and Egypt, the Byzantine Empire was at war, militarily and ideologically, with Islamism. The latter often accused of polytheism and idolatry the teaching of faith about the Holy Trinity and about the use of the icons. Precisely for this reason, the 8<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine emperors, of Isaurian or Armenian origin, decided to purify Christianity, to make it able to withstand the attack of Islamism.

3. *The Heritage of Hellenic Spiritualism.* The Christian iconography began to flourish even since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, yet, there was also an iconoclastic trend, pursuable up to the primary Christianity, put in relation with Origenism. The first Christian apologists took the Old Testament prohibitions against any representations of God just as literally as the Jews had done before them. While among the Christians this tendency gradually vanished, however, in the Origenistic circles, influenced by the Platonic spiritualism, the iconoclast tendencies survived (Meyendorff, 1983, 43).

Another motive that triggered this movement, which should not be ignored, is that the Byzantine kings, especially Leo III and Constantine V, expressed more clearly than all their predecessors the pretence of Caesaropapism. If the aim pursued by Constantine V, namely to “purge” the Byzantine Christianity not just of the veneration of the icons, but also of the strong and independent monasticism, had been attained, the whole character of the Eastern Christian piety and its ethos would have evolved totally differently (Meyendorff, 1983, 51). “The theological work of Constantin V and of the Iconoclast Council of the year 754 changed the situation radically. Iconoclasm now had on its side strong Christological arguments” (Chifăr, 1993, 179-185).

One of the main causes that determined the iconoclasts, from a theological perspective, to oppose the icons so violently, was the influence of monophysitism, a heresy denying the human nature of Jesus Christ. Monophysitism stated that the human nature was absorbed by the divine nature and, consequently, as he was not a man, Jesus could not be represented in the icon. Yet, iconoclasm also means docetism, as it refers to the Embodiment and denies the reality of Jesus’ physical manifestation; it also means nominalism as it questions the human appropriation of the fruit of the Embodiment; it means denial of the realism of holiness and of the capacity of transfiguring nature; and it means nestorianism, as it touched upon the dogma of the hypostatic union through the separation of the divinity from Christ’s body and as it hit against the divine maternity of the Theotokos (Meyendorff, 1983, 42-44)

Iconoclasm also appeared out of the incapacity of understanding the hypostatic union, as formulated at the 4<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council. It was not just about the fight against the icons; it meant taking over the Nestorianism or the Monophysitism through the simplistic separation of the two natures of our Savior.

The 8<sup>th</sup> century remains decisive for the classification of the dogmatic disputes focused on the veneration of the icon. In 754, an iconoclast council takes place, attended by 348 bishops, in order to discredit iconophily. Their arguments are not known in detail, since the iconophiles, finally prevailing, deprived us of all the documents that could have edified us about their adversaries. The iconomachs’ zeal is nourished by the desire to defend the purity of the Orthodox dogma, as they had the conviction that, by venerating the icon, one falls back into paganism or heresy.

The canonical decision regarding the veneration of the icon (Nicaea II, 787) lifts the interdiction supported vehemently by the iconomachs, frees the religious art from the suspicions of idolatry and preserves - on the level of the collective mind - a pedagogy of the image, which was, for a long time, a substitute of the book. Yet, the fact that a canonical basis was set for this issue does not mean that all the problems raised by the iconoclast theology were immediately solved.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council will mark the end of the dogmatic fight waged by the Church for the Orthodox confession of Christ's two natures. The great theologians that followed after Saint John of Damascus, especially the Saints Theodore the Studite and Nikephoros, patriarch of Constantinople (9<sup>th</sup> century) will cultivate their eloquence to defend the theological foundation of the veneration of the icon (Schönborn, 1994, 153).

#### **4.2. THE BYZANTINE ICON – THEOLOGY, ART, SYMBOL, REALITY AND SPIRITUALITY**

In essence, the icons are reduced to the fact that God's Son has made Himself a man and has shown Himself to us by His human face and that the image represented in the icon is not identical or consubstantial with the prototype. The defenders of the icons did not have a very clear idea about the doctrine of the uncreated energies brought in the creation by the Holy Spirit. This would have allowed them to explain the connection between Christ as a prototype and His icon.

The sense of the icon consists precisely in what it transmits or, better said, in the fact that it gives a visual testimony about these two realities: God's reality and the world's reality, the reality of grace and the reality of nature. The icon is realistic in two senses. Just like the Holy Scripture, it transmits a historical fact, an event of the holy history or a historical character portrayed under his physical appearance and, again, just like the Holy Scripture, it exposes the revelation from beyond time contained in a given historical reality.

The Byzantine style of the icons is beginning to be appreciated again everywhere today, because it is the style of spiritual transfiguration and subtlety of man in God.

"The art of Byzantium, ascetic and stern, solemn and refined, does not always reach the spiritual height and purity characteristic of the general level of the Russian iconography. It grew and was formed in times of struggle, and this struggle left its imprint upon it". (Leonid Uspensky, Vladimir Lossky, 1989, 44). Yet, it expresses, first, in the most obvious manner, the teaching of faith, and, secondly, it has become expression and source of divine knowledge. In the light of Christ's Embodiment - namely of a humanity deified and glorified - first in Christ, but, through Him and through the Holy Spirit, also in the Holy Virgin Mary and in the Saints, all this adornment of the Church was expressed in the Christian Byzantine art as a true "theology in colors" (Trubetskoi, 1973).

Deciphering the meanings of the huge mystery of the icon, perceived at the same time as image and symbol, makes us understand that these are two indissoluble realities help the human spirit to feel and understand the mystery of God's real presence in the Church as anamnesis of the redeeming events and their continual actualization.

For example, the Church depicts holiness in the icons through visible means, using an established symbolical language, such as the aureolas – exact pictural representations of the real manifestation of the spiritual world –, and certain shapes, colors and lines.

The theological and philosophical complexity of the problem has bestowed an immense tension on the debate. "Iconophilia has drawn us along in the wake of its violent adherences, but the voice of iconoclasm has never been killed, for all that." (Mondzain, 2005, XIII).

It is around all these analyses that our whole approach gravitates and will focus, in a reflection that is to take place on a completely different arena than that of the primary debate: an arena putting face to face "two currents of thought that cannot be understood without each other are set in relation to each other, until we finally discover that *contradiction is intrinsic to the nature of the image itself.*" (Mondzain, 2005, XIII).

This is the great Mystery of Christianity: God among men, God unseen, present secretly, mysteriously, sacramentally under the guise of the visible matter. Now, instead of the visible presence, the spiritual presence stepped in, by faith, Mysteries and icons, a presence that is not weaker but more intense, as it fully founds itself on the Holy Spirit (Casel, 1935, 29-30).

The icon, object of cult and work of art is specific of the Christian religion, and, more precisely, of the Orthodox Church. Actually, only in the Orthodox Church one can talk about a cult of the icons. Christianity is at the same time religion of the Embodied Logos and of the image; it is at the same time cult and culture. "*The icon is an image, a representation, but not any image and any representation but an image reproduced according to precise criteria, imposed not only by the rules of art and of culture,*

but especially by the doctrine of the Church” (Răducă & Quenot, 2003, 6-7). The icon painter does not try to express himself in the icon, but the Church teaching, following an ancient principle, namely that the rightly-glorifying faith is the norm of the rightly-glorifying high glorification, as Saint Irenaeus of Lyon confessed: *Lex credendi est lex orandi* and *Lex orandi lex est credendi* (Prosper of Aquitaine, *Capitula Coelestini* 8, p. 181).

Two are the profound reasons that the icon as object of cult finds itself on: the Embodiment of the divine Logos (the Son of God) and man’s need of concrete, touchable. “*The icon is not art illustrating Holy Scripture; it is a language that corresponds to it and is equivalent to it, corresponding not to the letter of Scripture or to the book itself as an object, but to the evangelical kerygma, that is, to the content of the Scripture itself, to its meaning, as is true also for liturgical texts.*” (Ouspensky, 1992, 139). Honouring the icons of Christ, of the Virgin, of the angels and of the Saints is a dogma (teaching) of the Christian faith, formulated at the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Niceea, 787); this dogma comes from the fundamental Church dogma: the testimony that God made Himself a Man. “[T]he image itself was confirmed as a witness to the Incarnation, and as a way of knowing God and of communion with Him.” (Ouspensky, 1992, 216). Thus, “[o]ften, and with good reason, the icon is called «theology in images»” (Ouspensky, 1992, 8).

Saint John of Damascus says: “*Together with the Father and the Holy Ghost we adore the Son of God, Him who was bodiless before the Incarnation, whereas the same is now become incarnate and has been made man while at the same time remaining God.*” (St. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of The Orthodox Faith* IV, 3, p. 336).

The symbol comprises two realities: one empirical, *seen* and one spiritual, *unseen*. The two levels are united neither in a logical way (this means this), nor by similarity (this represents this), nor by the cause-effect logic (this is the cause of that thing), but epiphatically, (from the Greek “to reveal”). “*A reality reveals another, but it reveals only to the extent to which the symbol itself takes part in the spiritual reality and is able to embody it*” (D. Stăniloae, 1957, 431).

The icon is a means of depicting the transcendent. From the perspective of the spiritual value that the holy icons have in our life, we can say that according to the teaching of faith of the Orthodox Church, they help us lift our thought and heart to the high, heavenly things. They help us become who we need to be, they help us be like and follow the example of the one they represent.

Icons are mirrors in which eternity mirrors itself, the keys opening to us the doors of the celestial world, gates or windows open to that “*new Heaven and new earth*” (Rev 21, 1). They are a testimony of the embodiment, passion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, namely of the salvation acts revealed to us. They are a sign of God’s mercy, given to us to strengthen our faith. This sign of mercy necessary to us on our way to salvation The Gospel is nothing but a verbal icon of Christ, just as the icon is the Gospel in colors. According to the expression of a great Orthodox theologian, “*For the image is a memorial. What the book does for those who understand letters, the image does for the illiterate; the word appeals to hearing, the image appeals to sight; it conveys understanding.*” (St. John of Damascus, *Treatise I*, 17, p. 31). The same idea is repeated by the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787): “*That which the narrative declares in writing is the same as that which the icon does [in colours].*” (Sahas, 1986, p. 69); *The representation of scenes in colours follows the narrative of the gospel; and the narrative of the gospel follows the narrative of the paintings. Both are good and honourable*” (Sahas, 1986, p. 98).

Looking at the icons, we entrust our eyes and we enlighten our soul, being moved by the faith that God’s ever-vigilant eye is watching us, as Victor Hugo’s poem *Conscience* wonderfully states.

The believers, with their wisdom enlightened by the ancestral faith, say that “*the icon is the window through which God is looking into our houses*”. The icon speaks to the mind and to the heart lit by faith. But when does this dialogue take place, if not at the moment when we kneel before it to pray to God to illumine our way, to guide our steps and to transform our life into a purer one? In this moment, God is truly looking into the hidden house of our heart. The holy icon is the one preparing us to stay connected to God through prayer. The images arising at that moment in the soul are not related to object, to matter, but to their being. They remain in the soul as word and need to become acts. Our thoughts turn at that moment to the depths where the very threads of the universal faith are woven, our thoughts turn to God, because all the prayers turn to God.



## 5. CONCLUSION

The Orthodoxy cannot be conceived without its iconographic treasure and cannot live without it, because it represents its vital element, it is its power, it is part of its being, it kindles its life, it creates that *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans* needed by the soul thirsty of God. Characteristic of the Eastern Church is the fact that it “*lives and teaches its theology liturgically*” (Zizioulas, <sup>2</sup>1997, p. 19), because the cult in the Orthodox Church – according to the statement of a great Orthodox theologian – is nothing else but “*heaven on earth*” (Ware, 1986, p. 9), it is “*the manifestation of the beauty of the spiritual world*” (Bulgakov, <sup>2</sup>1988, p. 129), helping with the believer’s ascent and transfiguration.

The Byzantine icons had their well-determined role in the history of Christianity, being, for the Orthodox believers, sacred objects of cultivation of religious piety and means of maintaining the communion with God and with His Saints. Saint Theodore the Studite highlights the identity between the cult of the icon and the one given to the prototype. Saint John of Damascus defends the images against a theology of the abstraction: the icon sends to an *otherwhere* than our world, to the divine reasons, which come from up there to justify and enlighten our world here, down here.

The icon had as prototype the image of God incarnated in the visible person of His Son, Jesus – this living image being projected and reproduced on the veil that Saint Veronica, merciful, used to wipe Christ’s face during His martyrdom. This meant, thanks to the embodiment of Christ, a first rehabilitation of the images in the Christian West, compared to the old Jewish interdiction. To Christ’s image was going to be added very soon the veneration of the images of all the holy persons – having reached a certain *similarity* with God – the Virgin Mary (*Theotokos*), Saint John the Baptist and Forerunner, then the Apostles and all the Saints.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- [1] Bulgakov, S. *The Orthodox Church*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Hopko, T., Trans.). Crestwood – New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. 1988.
- [2] Casel, O. *Das christliche Kultmysterium*. Regensburg: Pustel Verlag. 1935.
- [3] Chifăr, N.. *Das VII ökumenische Konzil von Nikaia*, Erlangen: K. Urlaub. 1993.
- [4] Meyendorff, J. *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Fordham University Press. 1983.
- [5] Mondzain, M.-J. *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*. (R. Franses, Trans.). Stanford – California: Stanford University Press. 2005.
- [6] Ouspensky, L. & Lossky, V. *The Meaning of Icons* (G.E.H. Palmer & E. Kadloubovsky). Crestwood – New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989.
- [7] Ouspensky, L. *Theology of The Icon*. vol. 1 (Guthiel, A., Trans.). Crestwood – New York: New York Seminary Press. 1992.
- [8] Prosper of Aquitaine, *Capitula Coelestini* in Clerk, P.D. “‘Lex orandi, lex credendi’: The original sense and historical avatars of an equivocal adage” (T.M. Winger, Trans.). *Studia Liturgica* 24 (1994): 178-200.
- [9] Quenot, Michel, *Icoana, fereastră spre Absolut* [The Icon, Window on The Kingdom] (Răducă V., Trans. and Preface), București: Editura Enciclopedică. 2003.
- [10] Sahas, D. *Icon and Logos. Sources in Eight-Century Iconoclasm. An annotated translation of the Sixth Session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicea, 787), containing the Definition of the Council of Constantinople (754) and its refutation, and the Definition of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1986.
- [11] Schönborn, C. von. *God’s Human Face. The Christ-Icon* (L. Krauth, Trans.). San Francisco: Ignatius Press. 1994.
- [12] St. John of Damascus. *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* (A. Louth, Trans.). Crestwood – New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press. 2003.

- [13] St. John of Damascus. *Writings*. (Chase, F.H. Jr., Trans.). New York: Fathers of the Church Inc. 1958.
- [14] St. Theodore the Studite. *On the Holy Icons* (C.P. Roth, Trans.). Crestwood – New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press. 1981.
- [15] Stăniloae, D. “Simbolul, anticipare și temei al posibilității icoanei” [The Symbol as Anticipation and Justification of The Icon’s Attributes], *Studii Teologice* 7 (1957): 427-452;
- [16] Stăniloae, D. *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* [*Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*], vol. 3, Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (E.I.B.M.B.O.R.), 1978,
- [17] Trubetskoi, E., *Icons: Theology in Color*, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press. 1973.
- [18] Ware, K. *The Orthodox Way*. Crestwood – New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press. 1986.
- [19] Zizioulas, J. *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Crestwood – New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press. 1997.