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The Ontological and Theological Dimensions of Art in the Eastern Christian Tradition

This article does not claim to be an exhaustive approach to the subject, its purpose to highlight some philosophical, anthropological, and theological dimensions of the icon as a work of art of God-human nature. Such context presupposes three perspectives: (1) ontological and theological, conveying the internal structure of the icon, (2) revealing the process of painting, (3) the perspective of perception of the cult work of art, its interpretation and veneration. In all three perspectives, the icon appears as a product of cooperation, that is, the synergy of God and man.

Данная статья не претендует на исчерпывающий подход к предмету, ее цель высветить некоторые философские, антропологические и теологические аспекты иконы как произведения искусства богочеловеческой природы. Такой контекст предполагает три ракурса: (1) онтологико-богословский, передающий внутреннюю структуру иконы, (2) раскрытие процесса живописи, (3) перспективу восприятия культового произведения искусства, его интерпретации и почитания. Во всех трех ракурсах икона предстает как продукт сотрудничества, то есть синергии Бога и человека.

Key word: philosophical, anthropological, and theological dimensions of the icon, Eastern Christian art, the synergy of God and man.

Ключевые слова: философские, антропологические и теологические аспекты иконы, восточно-христианское искусство, синергия Бога и человека.

The Iconic Art: Ontological and Theological Aspects

What is an icon? Etymologically, it is simply an “image” (εἰκών). However, it is not an ordinary illustration or a photograph of depicted reality, which is the case of a portrait. The icon is a visible image of the invisible and transcendent reality. This applies to icons of Christ – the incarnate Person of the Holy Trinity, as well as to icons of saints – human beings living at a specified time and endowed with peculiar physical traits. The icon does not reflect outer features or empirical qualities, but is an illustration and expression of an invisible idea embedded in the divine realm. To quote words of Fr. Pavel Florensky, an outstanding Russian thinker and one of the theoreticians of the icon, it must be said that the icon does not reflect the “face” (лицо), but the countenance (лик) [6, p. 50], that

is the *logos*, or the *eidos* of an individual – the spirit expressed in the body. Immaterial content comes to be expressed with the aid of material aids (a panel, metal or fabric, paint, wax, etc.). Therefore, it goes beyond the limits of time and space. Even more accurately, the function of the icon can be defined by resorting to a quotation from the Bible: “now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Heb 11:1). As Vladimir Weidlé would explain, in the icon it is “not the earthly, but the heavenly, not that which was, but that which is everlasting” that becomes visible [18, p. 15]. Therefore, the icon has ontological theological and eschatological significance: it is “a visible testimony to the invisible”; it is a cataphatic, and hence positive theology of the apophatic Proto-Image – God [10, p. 59].

The icon describes reality *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is discerned by Jean-Luc Marion who writes the following: “The icon summons the gaze to surpass itself by never freezing on a visible, since the visible only presents itself here in view of the invisible” [13, p.18]. On the one hand, the icon has its own nature, but on the other hand one cannot speak about its absolute ontological independence. It is a relative or correlative being; it exists inasmuch as it belongs to its Prototype and points to it. An icon is never an invention, an act of creation out of nothing. On the contrary, in the spirit of Christian Platonism, it is an artistic testimony to that which already exists. Hence, the source of the icon is not some creative work of a master who is trying to paint/write a religious-themed picture, but God Himself, who contains perfect models of all creatures, and who, more importantly, manifests Himself as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, who shares His essence/nature and actions with the other Persons.

Early Christian writers would emphasise that the essence/nature of God is incomprehensible. It cannot be expressed with words, terms, definitions, or any artistic devices. The essence of God (and by extension of any Person of the Holy Trinity) cannot be verbalised or depicted. That which we come to know about God always concerns His actions/energies, which are manifestations, or expressions of the essence. This fact is of fundamental relevance for a proper understanding of the icon. It does not illustrate the essence of God, but it refers to divine energies identified in the patristic tradition with divine names. The same can be said of icons of saints called “God’s friends,” which are sanctified thanks to the divine name which features on them (rendered in a graphic form and thus representing the divine energy/action).

Like the name (“an oral icon”) expresses the divine energy, so the written icon (a graphic representation of God’s name) symbolises the Prototype, the Proto-Icon that is the Person of Christ, and the other divine Per-

sons as well as saints. It is on this account that “in the pronounced name, through and with the icon, which ‘pronounces’ in it a silent and visible way, our love carries us to venerate and embrace the grace of the real presence in the very likeness of the icon” [5, p. 200].

Experts on the icon would refer to it as “contemplation in colour” or “theology in colour” (Eugene Trubetsky, Léonid Ouspensky), as well as “philosophy in colour” (Fr. Pavel Florensky, Viktor Bychkov). An icon is a symbol, but here the “symbol” is not something conventional arising from some agreement, or a creator’s invention. In this case a “symbol” is as much as an expression, a manifestation of inner and hidden content with the aid of outer means of expression. In other words, an icon is a special place where are present divine energy-names, that is God’s uncreated grace, or, more accurately, a place where divine actions meet human effort. Because of this, the symbolism of the icon is to the utmost degree real, and associated with participation in divine energies.

The conception of art which icon painting presupposes, of course, is symbolic. According to this conception, the purpose of art is not to create something out of nothing, but to give artistic witness to what already exists – it is not meant to create realities but the images of realities. A material basis, however, is required for the embodiment of these images which are distinguished from the actual objects themselves.

Alexei Losev, the “last Russian philosopher,” explicated the realistic symbolism of the icon as follows:

“Either God somehow *reveals* and manifests Himself – and then both icons and worship are possible . . . or icons are mere idols and do not express God or saints – then nothing can be said about any God, and complete and absolute positivism and atheism prevail” [12, p. 899].

The theological basis of the icon ontology thus consists in manifestation of the invisible and unknowable essence of God in divine actions/energies common to all the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Christ – the true God and a real human being – has two natures and, respectively, two actions/energies – the divine and the human one. As a perfect image of the Person of the Father (*imago Dei*), Christ is the Icon *sensu stricto*, that is the Proto-Icon – a prototype for all possible icons. Saint Maximus the Confessor would cry out:

“O mystery, more mysterious than all the rest: God himself, out of love, became man . . . Without any change in him, he took on the weakness of our human nature, in order to bring salvation to man, and to give himself to us men as ideal image [hypotyposis] of virtue and as a *living icon of love* and goodwill toward God and neighbour, an icon that has the power to elicit in us the dutiful response” [15, p.129].

The Theandric, divine-human character of the Second Person of the Holy trinity, constitutes yet another, Christological foundation of the iconic image revealing the divine realm in the worldly sphere, and hence in the Church reality. Note worthily, the prototype, which is Christ, is present in the icon not by way of essence, but by the likeness of the Person-Hypostasis. In other words, the Prototype is present in the icon not fully (which would be the case if we perceived a material object in a magical and idolatrous manner), but only partially. The icon is not a sacrament enabling substantial (which is the case of the Eucharist), but only intentional participation in Christ. This is because it is an image, not a Proto-Image.

The Divine-human Aspect of Icon Creation

The very process of icon creation is also characterised by a Theandric dimension; for it is nothing else than prayer, a meeting between God and man. The work of the iconographer is radically different from the work done by a painter, even one who in his output draws his inspiration from religious themes. Above all, an iconographer must be a believer and accept the Christian Revelation not so much in theory, but primarily in practice, and so he must experience God and be in unmediated contact with Him. Because of this, not every work of art painted in accordance with the established iconographic style has been recognised as an icon and accepted for liturgical or worship use. This can be exemplified with the output of such pre-eminent Russian painters as Mikhail Vrubel and Nikolai Nerikh. Though impeccable in the stylistic and artistic respect, their works raised doubts of a spiritual nature, and some technical devices and intentions, especially the ones employed by Nerikh, who was under the influence of Eastern religions, were even regarded as sacrilegious or occult. That is the reason why some of their paintings can be found in museums, and not in Orthodox churches. An iconographer must remain in dogmatic and liturgical unity with the Church; otherwise he does not deserve the title. It is sometimes very difficult to distinguish experimenting and applying innovative solutions in the creative process from stylisation, vulgarisation, or simplification.

The art of the icon is not founded on the artist's individuality, but on Christ, who appears to every iconographer in a unique and inimitable manner. Unlike the secular painter, the iconographer does not adopt an outside stance on his work, but in a way finds himself inside the image he is creating, "presenting the world *around* himself" [17, p. 160]. He displays an attitude of involvement, and not of detachment or alienation. In the process of icon creation, everything has its specific significance, ranging from the material used (a wooden panel, natural dyes) to the painting technique and individual artistic details (i.e. reverse perspective, use of colours, a specific

workflow, arrangement of the figures, etc.). It is noteworthy that the iconographer's spiritual experience becomes recorded once and for all. All the copies that will be subsequently made of the original (*подлинник*), that is the *canon*, will have the same spiritual value as the original icon, even though they may be radically different from it in respect of the artistic or historical value.

An important element in the creative process is inscribing God's name on the icon, whereby it becomes sanctified, that is removed from secular use. However, the icon does not always bear the artist's initials or signature, because the true Artist and Author is not a human being, but God, who is present and acting in His Church, in the conciliar (*соборном*) consciousness. Because of this, many famous iconic masterpieces remain anonymous. While in western religious painting both the model and the artist are recognisable (e.g. *Sistine Madonna* by Raphael Sanzio), in the icon the whole attention is focused on the Proto-Image.

Church Fathers used to stress that without the Holy Spirit's assistance one cannot get to know God, and therefore present (and by extension recognise) His image in the icon. Hence, writing an icon is possible thanks to God's inspiration which effects an inextricable connection between the Proto-Image and the image, as a result of which veneration is due to the icon (see further below on this issue). Such outstanding icon painters as Theophanes the Greek and Andrei Rublev perceived themselves as mere helpers to the Holy Spirit – the Great Master, or as translators of “supernatural significance into the language of art” [4, p. 304].

“What appears abstract from a naturalistic standpoint is realistic by the standards of an iconography that seeks a particular kind of transcendent simplicity in form and composition. Icons were meant to recreate a spiritual realm, to paint a world in which temporal beings live eschatological lives” [16, p. 207].

It is the Holy Spirit who “helps the iconographer to express with the aid of lines and colours that which is inexpressible, describe that which is indescribable, that is to present to believing, spiritual eyes the icon, a church painting as a divine-human *mysterium*, an antinomic unity of the image and the Proto-Image, a visible image and the invisible original” [10, p. 63]. Understandably enough, in the Eastern Christian tradition the iconographer is considered to be a servant of the Church, and not a craftsman/artist who in his creative process uses his own discretion; this was officially announced during the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Many icon painters (e.g. Alimpy, Theophanes the Greek, Andrei Rublev) were declared saints exactly on account of their effort to connect people and God. On the one hand, man “is a being who sees images, *zōon eikonikon*”, but on the other hand – a being who create those images, *zōon poiētikon*.

It is no wonder then that every stage of icon creation is accompanied by a special prayer, fasting and other ascetic practices. This does not merely serve to express the icon writer's ordinary piety, but it is an integral element of the creative process as synergy between God and man, and by extension collaboration between divine energies and human actions/efforts. In the Eastern Christian tradition, it is believed that all icon-writing canons (concerned with the composition, colours, light, symbolism, etc.) are not conventional products of human imagination, but a result of the activity of the Holy Spirit. It is worth restating that: an icon painter is merely (or as much as) a co-creator alongside God.

The Theandric Character of the Cult of Icons

An icon is more than just a work of art intended to be admired. Its basic function does not consist in fulfilling even the most noble and sublime aesthetic needs, but in presenting the invisible Image in empirical reality, in connecting heaven and earth, God and man. "There is no doubt that if iconography had created forms of worldly beauty it would certainly not have assisted in the perception and understanding of the mystery of worship" [8, p. 43]. Hence, "the purpose and the ideal of Byzantine iconography is the expression of the category of holiness, which, of course, is not made sensible by the physically beautiful, that is, is not by necessity united to this" [9, p. 176].

In other words, the icon reflects spiritual, and not sensual beauty, and hence beauty that is integrated with good, according to the ancient ideal of *kalokagathia*. In the Eastern Christian tradition, love of beauty was regarded as a synonym for love of wisdom and – by extension – holiness. An icon is an essence of divine wisdom and a result of a creative unification of human wisdom and divine conception. As Sergius Bulgakov put it, art (viewed as art in the service of God) shares in wisdom to a greater degree than science, which is limited to earthly and logical reasoning [2, p. 177].

One should view the icon with the heart's eyes, and not only with corporeal eyes. According to Patriarch Nicephorus' concept, the dynamics of cognition is directed at the outer image through contemplation of the intelligible image, and reaches up to the hypostasis of the figure featuring in the icon. The icon is capable of disclosing the revealed truth and sharing in it; it is timeless. Thus, the icon serves an important religious function (the one of unifying God and man) also at the final stage of its reception and perception. That is what another Theandric aspect of the icon is about. As a unity of the visible and the invisible, it makes for prayer and contemplation of the transcendent sphere. Moreover, the icon is "both a way to follow, and a means; it is itself prayer" [14, p. 90], and hence dialogue between God and man. Orthodox art is a language and a means of an Orthodox Church service [8, p. 45–46]. Iconic painting as such and other genres of Christian art emerged as a result of cultural needs.

In the dispute between iconoclasts and icon defenders, which took place in the 8th century, an orthodox concept of the cult of sacred images was devised. In antiquity, a painting or a sculpture embodied a represented individual, and so works of art depicting gods or emperors were held in absolute reverence. By contrast, veneration paid to the icon is described with the aid of the notion of worship or “proskynesis”, that is a bow different than the cult of “latreia” – adoration due to God only. The cult form of “proskynesis” safeguards against magical or superstitious treatment of the icon as a “sacred object” which directly concerns God’s nature/essence (even though over the centuries attempts have been made to add icon pieces to the Eucharistic species). According to Saint Basil the Great “honour paid to the image passes on to the prototype” [1], however, as mentioned before, this happens only in the order of energy, grace, and not substance.

The cult of icons is also possible thanks to the Holy Spirit, who makes it possible for the Proto-Icon, which is God, to be discerned in the visible image. An icon is not only intended as an instrument for manifesting personal piety, but has liturgical, and by extension communal significance (**λειτουργία** – “a deed of the people”). As it is a conciliar work (which is another argument why in the past the icon did not use to be signed with the author’s name), it belongs to the whole organism of the Church. Every liturgical act is of a Theandric character. Veneration paid to the icon is not a subjective, psychological or merely human activity, but participation in an objective act of salvation through the agency of the Holy Spirit. The icon is not there for sensual contemplation, but for encouragement to living communion with the represented reality.

The icon as a Theandric work is a guide to the divine realm, a “window on eternity” [11], a microcosm unifying the divine and the created worlds [7, p. 136]. While a painting showing religious themes (e.g. one by Leonardo da Vinci or any other Western painter) merely depicts, instructs, reminds, and decorates, etc., an icon calls for active participation, passing into a super-empirical sphere. Obviously, this does not happen mechanically, without a committed attitude on the part of the recipient of the work of art. Furthermore, there have been many cases of non-iconic paintings inspiring recipients, or even causing a mystical ecstasy and a radical conversion. By way of illustration, the famous Russian thinker Sergius Bulgakov went through a profound religious experience as he was contemplating the *Sistine Madonna* by Raphael Sanzio at the Dresden Gallery [3, p. 3]. Still, it is actually the icon that is a privileged place in which to meet God. Unlike the psychological and pedagogical significance of Western art, it is characterised by an ontological as well as anagogical and mystical dimension.

In other words, the icon *always* has *religious* significance and by definition *cannot be secular*. The function of the icon is to *reflect*, with the aid of artistic devices, *God's image in man*, whereas the aim of Western art (post-iconic – so to speak – as Old Christian and medieval art referred to the iconic paradigm) was to *create man's image*, not necessarily with regard to God, and not infrequently in opposition to Him. Every icon is miraculous, at least *in potentio*, as it is capable of transforming and sanctifying man.

Conclusion

Tomáš Špidlík noted that it is not only the icon, but every form of true art that is in essence religious and theurgic; it is “in a way God's word,” the cognition being non-discursive though. Still, the theurgic and Theandric divine-human character comes to show most profoundly in the case of the icon.

Note worthily, the arrangements made during the Seventh Ecumenical Council as to the icon were concerned with all kinds of plastic arts such as fresco, bas-relief, artistic sewing and the like. Hence, the theurgic and Theandric character peculiar to the icon determines the specificity of all Eastern Christian arts. It is not examined as a separate work of architecture, but as a whole creation encapsulating the work of the builders, icon painters, masters writing and decorating liturgical books, craftsmen making liturgical vestments, choristers and such like, and last but not least the ministry of priests. Therefore, a temple is a “synthesis of arts”.

Sacral architecture with its characteristic domes and mosaics is supposed to lead to the entrance to the heavenly temple, where Christ reigns. The earthly participation in the Eucharist in a sense is mirrored in the chalice-like shape of the dome. The mosaics do not only serve a decorative purpose in the Orthodox Church, but thanks to the play of reflected light they create a spatial image that the believer takes part in. In consequence, the opposition of “image–viewer” dissipates to make room for integration between the true Creator (and the Image), creation, God and man.

Over the centuries the belief that the icon is a divine-human and inspired work that reflects the heavenly beauty and is intended for prayer has remained unchanged. Therefore, theandricity is an integral element in icon painting and Eastern Christian art as such. In it, the ontological and theological dimensions precede the aesthetic aspect; more precisely – the latter one, as connected with the category of beauty, relies on the foundation of Divine truth and good. In this way, beauty is not treated as a subjective experience conditioned by psychological, historical, cultural and other circumstances, nor is it about “being appealing”, but as an objective expression of Beauty in itself. The aesthetic category of sublimity too is in the Eastern Christian art endowed with an objective and nearly literal sense-elevation of the human spirit to God and uniting it with Him.

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