

## ***How to View Icons: an Orthodox Theological View***

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The term ‘icon’ is most commonly used with respect to religious images done in the Byzantine style. This umbrella term includes not only the art of the Byzantine Empire, but also post-Byzantine art, as well as art, done in the Byzantine manner, outside Byzantium even before the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans. In other words, besides Byzantine art proper, what we are concerned with includes both what the Romanian scholar Nicolae Iorga has called ‘Byzance après Byzance’,<sup>1</sup> referring to the continued production of art, following the Byzantine tradition, after 1453, and the adoption of Byzantine forms during the Middle Ages within the territories comprising the ‘Byzantine Commonwealth’<sup>2</sup> (the Balkans, Romania, and Russia), as well as outside the Eastern Orthodox world, as in the *maniera greca*, which was at its height in thirteenth-century Italian art.<sup>3</sup>

The question that this paper poses is: How to view icons? or: What kind of viewing experience does the icon presuppose? It is, of course, possible to view icons as secularized works of art, which provide us with a pleasurable aesthetic experience. Indeed, people do it all the time. Art historians analyse icons in terms of composition, colour

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolae Iorga, *Byzance après Byzance: Continuation de l’Histoire de la vie byzantine* (Bucharest: Institut d’études byzantines, 1935).

<sup>2</sup> The expression is associated with Dmitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> I have offered a definition of ‘icon’ along these lines in the ‘Glossary of Terms’ at the end of my *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 167-168. See also, Viktor Bychkov, ‘Icon’ in Michael Kelly, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), vol.2, 448-450.

scheme, patterns of light, etc., and place them within a certain time and stylistic period. A growing number of exhibitions of icons are shown all over world, which attract massive numbers of visitors ready to admire the art of the icon. At the same time, one frequently has the suspicion that while such an aesthetic experience no doubt has its value, it misses something important about the original function of the icon. A hint of this ‘something’ is captured by the tendency to refer to such images as ‘icons’ rather than simply as ‘pictures’.

This paper will consider the experience that the icon offers from an Eastern Orthodox perspective. It will be shown that the enormous importance of the icon in Eastern Orthodoxy is defensible in very concrete theological terms. The religious image is, firstly, a container of presence and, therefore, a visual confirmation of the Incarnation. Secondly, it provides a visual-religious experience which is nothing less than a stage on man’s road to *theosis* (deification). This process is best illustrated through the icon of Christ. Standing before it, the believer faces his God who is present, in some way, in this image. The visual encounter with Christ opens the opportunity for union with God, which is the ultimate goal of *theosis*. Human beings can take advantage of this opportunity through their own effort and through the grace of God. Finally, one encounters a kind of paradox, as the moment of union is also a state beyond vision. It is significant, however, that the state beyond vision passes through visual experience. If this interpretation is accepted, one can understand much better the importance of the task of the iconographer, while the viewer of an icon can recapture something of the sense of spiritual consolation and hope that icons have brought to believers over the centuries.

### *The Icon as a Container of Presence in Orthodox Theology*

Nowadays, we are mostly used to seeing icons in museums and in exhibition catalogues. The setting of the art gallery and the museum naturally presupposes the aesthetic attitude of viewing images and objects of art. At the same time, there is the vague sense that there is something specific about the religious image that distinguishes it from other works of art. The point is pushed forth further when we notice visitors praying before icons exhibited in museums, thus disrupting

the very expectation on which a museum is founded and so blurring the boundary between a museum and a church. Why is it that some visitors to the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow take a prayerful, rather than a purely aesthetic, attitude before Andrey Rublev's *Old Testament Trinity* icon? Why is it that every time I have been to the Byzantine Museum in Thessaloniki I come across people praying and crossing themselves before the icons displayed there? It seems to me that there is an aspect of the icon that is sustained over and above the context in which it is presented. I believe that this aspect has a lot to do with the belief in the image as a container of the presence of the figure represented. The notion that images disclose presence, or what Gadamer has called 'picture magic',<sup>4</sup> occurs in many intellectual and religious traditions but it is particularly important for a well-defined strand of Eastern Orthodox thought which is concerned with the theology of the image.

Byzantine theology of the image was worked out during the Iconoclastic Controversy (726-787, the so-called First Iconoclastic period and 814-843, the Second Iconoclastic period). In many ways, it addresses problems which had been in the centre of attention already in the early Christian period.<sup>5</sup> An idea that runs throughout the theology of the image is that the icon contains the 'real presence' of the person represented. The term 'real presence' is my choice, which I suggested in an earlier work,<sup>6</sup> by drawing an analogy with the dogma of Real Presence in the Eucharist. In this I follow Jaroslav Pelikan, who points to the possibility of analysing 'the implications [of the nature of Eucharistic presence] for the definition of 'image' and for the use of images'.<sup>7</sup> The analogy is based on the idea that in both

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<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975, original German edition 1960), 123-126.

<sup>5</sup> On the icon in early Christian and Byzantine thought, see Gerhart Ladner, 'The Concept of the Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 7 (1953) 1-34; rpt. in Gerhart Ladner, *Images and Ideas in the Middle Ages: Selected Studies in History and Art* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1983), 73-111.

<sup>6</sup> *My Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon*.

<sup>7</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol.2: *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971-1989), 94.

cases – with the Eucharist and with icons – there is, simply speaking, something present and something absent at the same time. There is a fundamental difference, though. To use Aristotle’s terminology – as the Byzantines themselves did – while Real Presence in the Eucharist is *essential* (after the consecration, Christ is present in the elements of the Eucharist in his essence), in the icon the presence is *accidental* (Christ is present in his image in his accident or form, but not in his essence). In other words, the image is similar or *homoios* to the prototype, where *homoios* means ‘the same in quality, but not according to essence (*ousia*)’.<sup>8</sup>

The Christological argument that the Icon-defenders consistently resorted to claims a role for the image as confirmation of Christ’s Incarnation. It is on this idea that the salvation of man rests and the visual bears witness to it. Mankind is saved through Christ’s consecration of the flesh and the material world. It is the mystery of God become man that makes it possible for St. John of Damascus to say: ‘Never will I cease to honour matter which wrought my salvation [...]. Do not despise matter, for it is not despicable’, ‘God has made nothing despicable’<sup>9</sup> and further, directly referring to the icon: ‘Therefore I boldly draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes by partaking of the flesh and blood. I do not draw an image of the immortal Godhead, but I paint the image of God who became visible in the flesh’.<sup>10</sup> The text of the Council of Nicaea II (787) reads that ‘this [i.e., representational art] is quite in harmony with the history of the spread of the gospel, as it provides confirmation that the becoming man of the Word of God was real and not just imaginary and as it brings us a similar benefit’.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Viktor Bychkov, *Vizantiiskaia estetika* [Byzantine Aesthetics] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977), 29; my translation.

<sup>9</sup> John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images* I. 16 (trans. David Anderson, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980, 23-24).

<sup>10</sup> John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Norman Tanner, (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (London: Sheed & Ward and Washington: Georgetown University Press), 135.

There are profound implications to the view that God's Incarnation sanctified matter once and for all. To claim that the sacred image bestows grace would mean to compare it with the sacred word, which is unquestionably a means of grace and is divinely inspired. As St. Theodore the Studite said: 'We should believe that divine grace is present in the icon of Christ and that it communicates sanctification to those who draw near with faith'.<sup>12</sup> In the words of the modern scholar Hans Asmussen, 'whoever has heard the message of the incarnation of the Word can never again pass by this form, can never again conceive of Christianity as formless [...] Christianity is the Christ'.<sup>13</sup> The implication is that religious art is made possible by the Incarnation. In Leeuw's opinion, 'Christian theology does not begin with the creation, but with the redemption [...]. At this point begins also the theology of the arts'.<sup>14</sup>

Byzantine theology of the icon became a permanent feature of Eastern Orthodoxy. To be Christian Orthodox presupposes, almost by definition, an allegiance to the cult of the holy images. It is, however, rarely noticed is that there are actually two distinct assertions running through the theology of the image that was worked out in the eighth and ninth centuries. On the one hand, word and image are supposed to have an equal status while, on the other, there is a recurrent implication that the image can do something that the word cannot and is a unique form of intuiting the Deity.<sup>15</sup> It is the latter idea that seems to me really interesting and promising. I propose to look at it through the lens of the visual implications of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*.

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<sup>12</sup> Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Asmussen, *Die Lehre vom Gottesdienst*, (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1937). I am quoting from Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), 325.

<sup>14</sup> Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, 328.

<sup>15</sup> On the Byzantines' belief in the distinct qualities of the visual image, see Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 125-138. See also John Yiannias, 'A Re-examination of the 'Art Statute' in the Acts of Nicaea II', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 80 (1987), 348-359.

## *The Icon as a Helpmate in the Process of Theosis*

For the Orthodox the doctrine of *theosis* or ‘deification’ is not just an essential part of their faith but it is, in many ways, the central, defining feature of this faith.<sup>16</sup> It is predicated on Christ’s Incarnation. In the words of Gregory Nazianzen, ‘it was necessary that man should be sanctified by the humanity of God’.<sup>17</sup> The frequently repeated formula, first used by St Irenaeus whence it entered the Orthodox tradition, was that ‘God made Himself man that man might become God’.<sup>18</sup> The later Byzantine tradition, the most influential representative of which was St Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century, drew mainly on Maximus the Confessor, who was himself inspired by the Cappadocian Fathers, the Macarian Homilies and Dionysius the Areopagite. The idea at the heart of the doctrine of *theosis* is that deification is the goal of humanity. In the words of Maximus in Epistle 24: ‘For this is why he made us that we might become partakers of the divine nature and sharers in his eternity, and that we might appear to be like him through deification through grace’. In this paper, I will understand *theosis* in the sense of man’s union with God. I will suggest that the experience of the believer before an icon – remember that the icon discloses presence – is a step on the road to the union between God and man.

Going through the corpus of writings on deification, one cannot help but notice the preoccupation with vision, seeing, visual perception and the recurrent leitmotif of light. At the same time, it is clear that what

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<sup>16</sup> The doctrine has played a role in other Christian traditions as well (for an overview, see Michael Christensen and Jeffery Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: History and the Definition of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007). *Theosis* has been welcomed by some Anglican theologians, as well as by some Methodists and the Pietist movement. It has had a long, though not continuous, history in Catholic theology.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 102.

<sup>18</sup> See, Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 97. Lossky’s comment is useful: ‘An ineffable descent of God to the ultimate limit of our fallen condition, even unto death – a descent of God which opens to men a path of ascent, the unlimited vistas of union of created being with Divinity’.

these writings refer to is neither ordinary human vision nor everyday light. More than that, there is an insistence that in the process of *theosis* man has to strive to go beyond his state of corporeality and his earth-bound senses, including the sense of vision. In other words, vision and visuality undoubtedly play an important, but also an ambiguous role in the literature of *theosis*. Why does a doctrine of man's transcendence of his humanity consistently express itself through a theology of light and metaphors centred on human vision? Are these just metaphors or there is a deeper reason that visual concepts became the appropriate vehicle for the expression of the theological doctrine under our attention?

The background of the Eastern Orthodox theology of light, especially in terms of language, is drawn from pagan Platonism and Neoplatonism. The Platonic tradition, moreover, refers to more ancient sources, such as the mystery cults.<sup>19</sup> In Plato's *Phaedrus*, the philosopher beholding 'the *vision* of truth' is described as 'ever being initiated into the perfect mysteries'<sup>20</sup>. Vision and light are prominent with the pagan Neoplatonists as well. Union with the One is frequently described exactly as *vision*. Plotinus, however, ever aware of the inadequacies of language, points out that the term 'vision' is imprecise as it implies a duality between the viewer and the viewed which disappears at the moment of union,<sup>21</sup> which, as we know, is the end of *theosis*.

The language of light and vision was taken over by Christian Neoplatonism where it assumed a new importance. If *theosis* is the goal of human life, then the question of how one achieves union with God and likeness to God becomes of primary significance. The simple answer is that deification is the result of divine-human cooperation. It can be achieved only through divine grace. At the same time, it is a gift of God that man, by exercising his free will, can either accept or

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<sup>19</sup> On this, see Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in Greek Patristic Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 45-50.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 249c, trans. B. Jowett.

<sup>21</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* III 9.10-11-13; VI 9.11.4-7.

reject.<sup>22</sup> Maximus the Confessor insists in his *Commentary on the Lord's Prayer* that 'the mystery of salvation belongs to those who choose it, not to those who are compelled by force'.<sup>23</sup> On his own man cannot achieve deification, but God, in his goodness, 'grants the power for deification itself'.<sup>24</sup> It is here that the importance of visual images is to be found - God manifests Himself through material, perceptible objects as a concession to our state. As Dionysius says, 'it is by way of perceptible images that we are uplifted as far as we can be to the contemplation to what is divine'.<sup>25</sup> There are, according to Dionysius, three ways of knowing God – a direct intuition by the mind, knowledge through intellectual activity, and by way of contemplation of images provided by the senses.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, material things are 'sacred veils', through which God is known, while, at the same time, in the process of our ascent to God we are stimulated to go beyond perceptible objects. The end of man's ascent is the 'truly mysterious darkness of unknowing',<sup>27</sup> but it is necessary that it goes through material symbols and images that become a vehicle of *theosis*.<sup>28</sup>

In the process of his spiritual and religious development towards deification, man needs to purify himself of the earthly passions. The

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<sup>22</sup> See Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis: l'union à Dieu chez Denys l'Aréopagite* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) and Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 2: *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977), esp. 10-16.

<sup>23</sup> *Or. Dom.*, PG 90: 880B; English translation in *The Philokalia*, vol.2, trans. Gerald E. Palmer, Philip Sherrad, and Kallistos Ware (Faber & Faber, 1981), 289.

<sup>24</sup> Dionysius, DN VIII.5, 893 A.

<sup>25</sup> Dionysius, EH I.2, 373B, English translation in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, DN 7.3 (*Pseudo-Dionysius*, 108-9).

<sup>27</sup> Dionysius, MT I.3, 1000D-1001A, English translation in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 137.

<sup>28</sup> There is a useful analysis of this in Filip Ivanović, 'Vizuelni aspekt oboženja po Dionisiju Areopagitu' [The Visual Aspect of Deification According to Dionysius the Areopagite], *Zbornik radova Vizantoloskog institute*, issue 47, 2010, 39-54. See also Paul Gavrilyuk, 'Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite' in Paul Gavrilyuk and S. Coakley, (eds.), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 86-104.

notion of purification (*katharsis*) is central to a whole line of Christian, as well as Platonic, thought. Already the Early Christian Fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, spoke of the path to God which could be walked only by those ‘who have detached themselves as far as possible from everything human’.<sup>29</sup> The need for man to transcend his corporeal state is recurrent with Dionysius the Areopagite as well. Dionysius describes ‘the completely divine man’ as one who ‘will not perform what belongs to the flesh except the things which are the most necessary in accordance with nature’,<sup>30</sup> just as Maximus spoke of Christians as ‘emptying themselves of the passions’.<sup>31</sup>

The stage of purification is followed by the stage of illumination or the vision of God. It is worthwhile noticing that purification, which implies by definition transcending the earthly senses, including vision, precedes illumination and is therefore a condition for the latter. In other words, the stage of illumination is an experience beyond human vision. The theology of light with St. Dionysius the Areopagite, Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas, etc., plays on St. Paul’s notion that the blessed would ‘see’ God ‘face to face’ (1 Cor. 13:12). Here, one is reminded of Plotinus’ remark – seeing implies a duality between viewed and viewer – while St. Paul refers to the union that those who are blessed would attain with God. It appears, that ‘light’, ‘vision’, ‘seeing’ can be very misleading terms.

How can we describe the ambiguous status of visuality in this age-long intellectual tradition? Ha Poong Kim’s description of ‘seeing spirituality’ in his *To See God, to See the Buddha* can be useful for our purposes. The ‘state of God-awareness’<sup>32</sup> is a state of ‘seeing

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<sup>29</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 2. 125. 5 (ed. O. Stählin–L. Früchtel, *GCS* 52 [15], Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1960); English translation in Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 129.

<sup>30</sup> Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.7, 433 BC, English translation in *Pseudo-Dionysius*.

<sup>31</sup> Maximus, *Or. Dom.* 2, 877A English translation in *The Philokalia*.

<sup>32</sup> Ha Poong Kim, *To See God, to See the Buddha: An Exploration of Seeing Spirituality with Meister Eckhart, Nagarjuna, and Huang Bo* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic, 2010), 16.

beyond words and concepts'.<sup>33</sup> Vision understood as 'seeing spirituality' is decidedly different from ordinary vision and it describes a 'spirituality that seeks unity with the Absolute'.<sup>34</sup> Russian and other Slavic languages, in fact, offer a better terminology than English in this context. There is 'umozrenie', a compound word, made up of 'um' which means 'mind' and 'zrenie', i.e., 'vision', but also 'bogozrenie' literally 'God-seeing'. On these terms, viewing icons can be described as a complex visual-religious experience of 'God-seeing', which has been made available through God's grace to a believer, who has undergone a process of spiritual purification.

### *Conclusion*

This paper offered a theological reading of the viewing experience of an Orthodox Christian believer before an icon. It was suggested, first, that what distinguishes this experience from the aesthetic attitude of formalist, Kantian aesthetics is the awareness of the viewer that the icon is, in some sense, a container of the presence of the depicted figure (Christ, the Virgin, or a saint). The Byzantine theology of the image develops a widely accepted position on the nature of this presence. Second, the notion of presence in the icon was placed within the framework of a doctrine which is essential to Orthodoxy, i.e., *theosis* or the deification of man. It is the presence of Christ in his image that opens up the opportunity of a union of man and God, which is the ultimate aim of *theosis*. If this interpretation is accepted, surely, the definition of 'icon' that this paper started with needs to be expanded. Apart from matters of style and chronology that art historians usually draw attention to, the 'icon' is, firstly, a religious image that contains, in some sense defined by theology, the presence of the holy figure represented. Secondly, the icon offers a viewing experience which is a stage on the road to man's union with God, i.e., *theosis*.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Kim, *To See God, to See the Buddha*, VI.

<sup>34</sup> Kim, *To See God, to See the Buddha*, VI.

<sup>35</sup> This paper is based, in part, on the text I presented at the conference, organized by Christoph Schneider and the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge, 'Logos – Cosmos – Eros: Horizons and Limitations of

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