

# the ultimate reality and meaning expressed in eastern christian icons



Originally published in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 5 (1982), 296-313;  
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# The Ultimate Reality and Meaning Expressed in Eastern Christian Icons

## I THE ICONS

The holy icon has become the symbol of Eastern Christianity, for it truly represents one of the highest achievements of Christian art. Its roots are to be found in the most primitive concrete function of human knowledge, the language of the image. A symbol, or a sign is at the root of the meeting of two persons; thus in the interpersonal relationship, an image precedes even words, for smiling, waving or shaking hands, bowing, kissing, etc. are signs and images more reassuring than words. In the life of faith images and symbols are absolutely necessary, for any serious religion is an attempt to reach into or to respond to the realm of the transcendent super-human, supernatural, infinite, mysterious, eternal, or simply ultimate divine reality; and this divine reality cannot be adequately expressed in words alone. Thus the poetic *and* artistic expressions of religious reality and of the life of faith are complimentary.

Among artistic expressions of faith the holy icon occupies one of the most prominent places (Thon, 1979; Ouspensky, 1978; Trubetskoi, 1973; Kalokyris, 1971; Onasch, 1969; Clement, 1960; Weidle, 1960; Ouspensky, 1960; Bock, 1959; Ammann, 1957; Ouspensky-Lossky, 1952; Kondakov, 1927). The holy icon is not a picture in the conventional sense, for it is not a realistic type of religious art. A picture or a statue is too concrete, too material and too close to earthly human existence. In fact, pictures do not represent adequately, but on the contrary, misrepresent the supernatural and divine reality which one tries to portray.

Western Christian art is usually intended to *teach*, especially the children and the illiterate. The primary function of the holy icon is not to teach, but to become a channel of divine light, a serviceable instrument of prayer and communion with God the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Thus, an icon is a meaningful symbol of the divine grace and life. It is an expression of the divine life that illuminates, purifies, elevates, divinizes and glorifies the human being and creation in general. It is a symbol of hope and an expression of the unity of man and God, of the divine light, life and love in us.

Thus the holy icons are a very special type of religious art lacking any coherent artistic perspective. They are characterized by a certain flatness and abstraction,

because they do not intend to represent natural human persons, or to portray any human qualities. They try to represent spiritualized human persons who have become temples of God. Icons are called 'Holy' because they try to portray the mysteries of faith and show their relevance to the future eschatological existence in the holiness and glory of God. They are masterpieces expressing ultimate reality and meaning *par excellence*.

This function of icons is very impressively manifest in the special wall with gates and adorned with icons called the iconostasis. The iconostasis stands in the church building as the division between the sanctuary and the nave, and thus speaks of the two kingdoms, the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of Earth. The gates symbolize the passage from the earthly to the heavenly kingdom, and the icons on it echo the same meaning. Through them one glimpses the reality beyond; and through them the reality beyond touches us, and we sense contact with the great Holiness of the *mysterium tremendum*. The traditionally-full iconostasis has seven rows of icons representing the major persons and events of the Old and New Testaments, that is, the history of salvation in chronological sequence. The most important of all the icons on the iconostasis are that of Christ as Lord and Teacher and that of the Mother of God with Child situated on either side of the central gates. On these central gates themselves there is an icon of the Annunciation, the moment at which the earth experienced its initial contact with the ultimate divine reality in the New Testament. The whole iconostasis is eschatologically oriented. It points to the here and now as the last age which is in progress towards the definitive fulfillment through the transfiguration, the divinization and the glorification of the whole of reality in the most intimate fellowship with the Triadic God.

In order to better appreciate the real meaning and significance of the holy icons, we have to recall the particular history of the Christian East.

## 2 HISTORY OF EASTERN CHRISTIANITY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ICONIC ART

The history of the Christian East is firmly rooted in the history of Jesus and his times. It is rooted in faith in Jesus Christ the inhumanized Logos, who lived and proclaimed the divine truth and instituted the Church. He suffered, died on the cross, rose, ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father. Thus Jesus Christ is the *somatic* foundation of the mystery of the Church. The day of Pentecost and the descent of the Holy Spirit from the Father through the Son became the *pneumatic* foundation of the Church. The fiery tongues and the miracle of many languages on the day of Pentecost foreshadowed the necessary cultural and linguistic differentiation of the subapostolic Church, its adaptation to many new political, cultural and linguistic realities. This Pentecostal adaptation was the beginning of local, autonomous and particular churches, which understood themselves to be a confederation of churches within the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ – or Church of God. These particular churches became the target of bloody persecution by the Roman imperial authorities and other political powers. Thus they became Churches of martyrs struggling for survival.

The dramatic rise and spread of Christianity was crowned by its liberation in 313 A.D. under Constantine the Great. In 330 A.D., this emperor transferred the imperial capital from Rome to New Rome (Byzantium, later Constantinople). This beautiful and wealthy cosmopolitan city soon became the world centre of political administration, church politics, trade, commerce and culture. New Rome could boast of the most beautiful structures, palaces, buildings, portals, gates and churches. Further, it possessed the most outstanding collection of ancient Greek, Roman and Oriental marble and metal statues, ornaments, mosaics, decorated floors and paintings. Many buildings had multicolored corridors and arcades, huge rotundas, decorated galleries, etc. The clothing of the emperor, of his family, of the officials, soldiers and private citizens was splendid, woven with gold, silver, purple and adorned with jewellery. Huge *triclinia* or banquet halls, and indeed the whole imperial palace with the golden throne and the two lions at its feet, increased the splendor and charm of this unique city to which nobles, merchants and artists flocked from all Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Thus a new culture developed, which later was labelled as Byzantine. In it we can distinguish the main constitutive elements as follows: (1) Roman statehood with the Roman law, order, and social conditions; (2) Greek language and culture, which soon replaced the Latin language, and the Roman customs; (3) Oriental elements, like the Egyptian funeral rites and paintings (the cradle of Byzantine iconography); Persian angelology, astronomy and tapestry; Semitic arabesques and architecture (one of the targets of later iconoclasm); Slavic foods (like *Koliva*, that is, whole wheat with honey and poppy-seed) and furs; and finally, the broad influence of Oriental parables, legends, poems, epics, proverbs, philosophical and religious literature, etc.

Just as the New Rome had its influence on the surrounding world, it had an influence on the Church as well. New Rome soon developed its own distinctive Church and rite, which were later labelled as Byzantine. As a matter of fact, each of the Eastern Churches tended towards developing and preserving its particularity, or local and cultural autonomy, consisting of both material and formal elements. The material elements are: (1) a group of faithful or the People of God; (2) an indigenous hierarchy with apostolic succession; (3) a particular discipline which can be canonical (general norms, and canons concerning persons, things, processes, penalties, etc.), or liturgical (i.e., external cult or ceremonies, liturgical books with texts and rubrics, vestments, utensils, calendar with different cycles of feast days, fasts, etc.); (4) a particular homogenous spiritual heritage, patrimony, or tradition, which entails origins and history, language(s), a particular culture and mentality rooted in a special *Weltanschauung*, a particular ethnic group or groups, a distinct theological school (system or orientation); distinct terminology, expression, style, etc.; a special type of spiritual or monastic life; a special and distinct mode of instruction or school system; finally, a special kind of religious art with distinct architecture, painting, iconography, decorations, embroideries, vestments, utensils, chant and music, woodcarving, even dance (as in the Ethiopian Church). etc.

The formal elements of local autonomy in a certain rite consist of: (1) recognition (expressed or tacit) as *sui iuris*, that is, autonomous by a legitimate authority (the