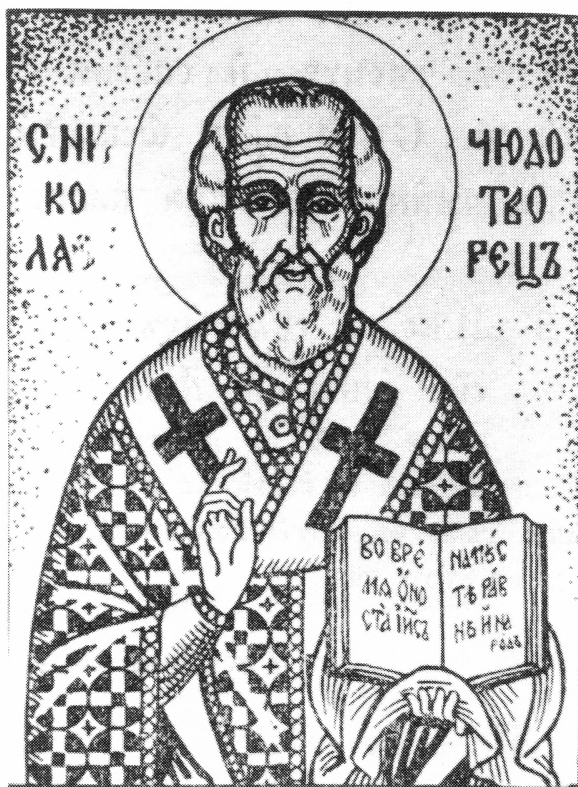


# THE HUMAN BEING AS THE DIVINE ICON IN EASTERN CHRISTIANITY



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From the point of view of the contemporary natural sciences, the human being stands as a mysterious personal creature halfway between the microcosmos and the macrocosmos. Through knowledge and scientific effort, the human mind descends into the microcosmos only to encounter indeterminacy, duality, and paradox which point to an impenetrable mystery in existing reality. In the ascent to the macrocosmos, ultimately, the human person comes to the final featureless unity of space-time, mass-energy, and matter-field, all of which point to the ultimate undiversified and dynamic ground beyond which there appears to be no further possibility of progress.<sup>1</sup>

The human being stands as a personal being among the maddening numbers of galaxies with trillions of stars and other celestial bodies, pulsars, quasars, black holes and other phenomena, some of which are tens of billions of light years away. On the other hand, the human being is composed of trillions of particles which were generated by nature in the celestial furnaces—the stars—billions of years ago and therefore it may be said that “human beings are literally star children.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the human being is, it seems, the end-product of biological evolution which lasted upon planet number three, that is, the Earth, for some four billion years. The human body and especially the human brain is the glory of creation and the most eloquent witness to the wisdom of the Almighty Creator.<sup>3</sup>

However, this is only the beginning consideration of the mystery of the human being, for as a being composed of body and soul, the human being is a unity of the natural, material world and of the supernatural, spiritual world.<sup>4</sup> Thus the mystery of the human being transcends both the microcosmos and the macrocosmos; the human mystery lies in those dimensions beyond the space-time continuum, in the sphere of spiritual reality which cannot be adequately described. This is so because the icon of God in the human being is necessarily unknowable and ineffable for God as the archetype of the icon is unknowable and ineffable. Thus the human being is a mystery.

Above and beyond a natural mystery is the mystery of Christian faith which can be described as a living and life-giving, supernatural, divinely revealed reality which is founded on the one hand on a historic fact and on the other hand on

a permanent, dynamic, and uninterrupted presence in the supernatural world. <sup>5</sup>

The human being is a mystery of divine origin because he or she is a personal creature of God. But the act of creation is the most radical expression of the mystery of transfiguration, that is, the infinite and divine act of creation is an act of love of God the Father for the Son in the Holy Spirit which visits nothingness and transforms it or transfigures it into an existing reality. So reality becomes an expression of God's love and a finite icon of His infinite glory and ultimately of His ontological holiness. <sup>6</sup> Created reality, be it material or spiritual, visible or invisible, is, by the very fact of its existence, transfigurable because of an inherent capacity rooted in its being for transfiguration or development and final fulfillment in the inner life, light, and love of the Triadic God. Thus, the potency of obedience of each existent for its supernatural fulfillment or divinization should be expressed in terms of transfigurability, that is, the capacity to receive within itself the activity of the Transfigurer *par excellence*, the Triadic God, who by his transcendent and immanent dynamism can intensify in creatures the inborn inchoate divine likeness, so that creatures in fact become the icons of the divine glory and holiness. <sup>7</sup>

### Iconography

When we say that a person is a special divine icon, we must specify the precise theological foundations for the icon and the iconographic tradition. It is true that the inhumanization of the Divine Logos is the foundation of Eastern Christian iconography for thereby the eternal Divine Logos assumed not only an integral human nature and the entire human existential condition but also took upon Himself the totality of history of the cosmos and of mankind. Furthermore, He took upon Himself an integral human personality in a psychological sense but not in an ontological sense for it was the person of the Divine Logos to whom the integral human nature, its historicity, and psychological personality were united. Therefore the Council in Trullo (692) was right to proclaim:

Now, in order that perfection be represented before the eyes of all people, even in paintings, we ordain that from now on, Christ our God, the Lamb who took upon himself the sins of the world, be set up even in images according to his human character (*Kata ton anthropinon charactera*) instead of the ancient lamb. Through this figure, we realise the height of the humiliation of God the Word and are led to remember his life in the flesh, his suffering and death and the redemption ensuing from it for the world. <sup>8</sup>

However, we may not forget that the Word-of-God-made-man is the Carrier and the Revealer of the Holy Spirit and *vice versa*, the Holy Spirit is the Carrier and Revealer of the Word-of-God-made-man. Moreover, both the Word-of-