

Icons – Holy Images and their Pedagogical Relevance. An Orthodox Perspective

EMMANUEL P. PERSELIS*

Man is a symbol-making creature and through symbols he/she defines, interprets and sustains his/her life and existence. Through symbols man makes possible any communication whatsoever between his/her self, the others and the ultimate being(s). As Michael G. Lawler puts it:

«Symbol is a way of knowing, a particular way of seeing. But it is not a way of knowing in clear and distinct Cartesian ideas. Symbolic knowledge is vague and opaque. But it is vague and opaque, not in the sense that it is empty of meaning or that its meaning is obscure, but rather in the sense that its depth of meaning is unfathomable. The human mind can never get to the bottom of it, can never substitute discursive language for the symbol and be done with it. The meanings that are embodied in symbols are not precisely defined and detailed. Rather they are confusedly communicated in such a wise that a personal response is required to understand the meanings embodied in the symbols»¹.

As a creator of symbols man has been expressing for centuries his/her feelings, emotions, thoughts and actions in such a way that all these expressions construct eventually, in space and time, a firm basis in which human civilization is rooted. Within this context, all religions of the world seem to use and exalt symbols in various ways in order to convey and regenerate meaning(s) concerning human relations towards ourselves, the others and the ultimate being(s) and existence. As John Dewey rightly affirms:

* Emmanuel Perselis is Professor of Christian Religious Education, School of Theology, University of Athens, Greece.

1. MICHAEL G. LAWLER, «Symbol and *Religious Education*», *Religious Education*, 72 (1977), 4, 363-372, especially p. 366.

«The same word, “symbol,” is used to designate expressions of abstract thought, as in mathematics, and also such things as a flag, crucifix, that embody deep social value and the meaning of historic faith and theological creed. Incense, stained glass, the chiming of unseen bells, embroidered robes accompany the approach to what is regarded as divine. The connection of the origin of many arts with primitive rituals becomes more evident with every excursion of the anthropologist into the past. Only those who are so far removed from the earlier experiences as to miss their sense will conclude that rites and ceremonies were merely technical devices for securing rain, sons, crops, success in battle. Of course they had this magical intent, but they were enduringly enacted, we may be sure, in spite of all practical failures, because they were immediate enhancements of the experience of living».²

From its beginning, Christianity has chosen, adopted and reinterpreted existing symbols, and at the same time created and used for its specific needs entirely new symbols. This is clearly apparent within the field of Christian art. As John W. Cook writes:

«Early Christian art surviving from the first half of the third century reflects the diversity of the Greco-Roman context from which it emerged. The earliest iconographic figures, borrowed directly from late antique conventions, were placed in new compositional and environmental settings on jewelry and other minor arts».³

Among the most powerful symbols in Christian art has been the image of Jesus Christ. For Jesus is not only the founder of Christianity but, moreover, is as he is regarded by his followers the only son of God who was incarnated to save the world and men. Is it not surprising then that, as John W. Cook states,

«The most distinctive characteristic of Christian iconography is its preoccupation with the person and role of Jesus Christ and his followers. The image of Christ as earthly founder and heavenly savior is central to the religion, especially insofar as the Church defines itself as the body of Christ on earth. Thus the changing repertoire of images of Jesus and his followers reveals the nature of the religion in its many cultural and historical manifestations».⁴

2. JOHN DEWEY, *Art as Experience*, (1934), Perigee Books, New York, 1980, pp. 9-30.

3. JOHN W. COOK, «Iconography: Christian Iconography», *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 7, 57-64, especially p. 57, New-York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

One of the preexisting symbols, which was in common use as a secular symbol representing either the power of the king/emperor, and the devotion and loyalty of his subjects to him, or to the heroes/holy men of the time, is the artifact in which the image of the king/emperor or the hero/holy man was depicted, usually on a piece of wood. Having this prehistory, this kind of art, called icon, became a firm symbol of Christianity, especially within the Byzantine boundaries of Eastern Christendom. The fixation of the icons in the Eastern Orthodox Church as liturgical utensils occurred soon after the great historical controversy concerning the use and abuse of the icons in the 8th and 9th centuries in Byzantium. As John S. Strong puts it:

«In the Christian tradition, Christ was at first represented aniconically by various symbols such as the fish or the lamb, or by sacred monograms such as the combined Greek letters chi-rho (for Christos)». Images per se —of Christ and the saints, since the Christian tradition has always been somewhat reluctant to depict God the Father— did not appear until the fourth century, and their veneration did not really flourish until the second half of the sixth. At first, images may have served primarily didactic and decorative purposes; at least, they were defended on such grounds. But soon they came to fill admittedly devotional functions. This was especially true of the icons that became a prominent feature of Eastern Orthodoxy. Deliberately nonnaturalistic, these images of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints were supposed to reflect the other world and avoid the recollection of this one. They came, indeed, to be viewed as direct mirrors or impressions of the figures they represented, akin to the imprint made by a stamp or seal. They were thus thought to be filled with sacred and potentially miraculous power and accordingly became effective foci for prayer and veneration»⁶.

From their restoration in the 9th century until today, the icons «appear in a variety of media: painting, mosaic, sculpture, or illuminated manuscript. Their subject matter includes biblical figures, lives of the saints, scenes and narrative

5. Cf. E. KITZINGER, «The Cult of images in the age before Iconoclasm», *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, No. 8, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1954, pp. 83-150. Peter Brown, «A Dark-Age crisis: aspects of the Iconoclastic controversy», *The English Historical Review*, LXXXVIII (CCCXLVI), 1973, pp. 1-34.

6. JOHN S. STRONG, «Images: Veneration of images», *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 7, 97-104, especially p. 97-98, New-York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987.

cycles that relate specifically to the liturgical calendar»⁷. The icons there are not only considered *to be* an indivisible and indispensable part of the liturgy of the Eastern Christianity, but *moreover* they serve as vehicles of veneration and a visible means of piety and devotion towards the person of Jesus Christ, the saints, the martyrs, etc. After all, the images of these holy figures are artistically represented in a *manner* peculiar to drawing (i.e., non-naturalistic) and in a colorful form and style. This peculiarity is *perceived* and understood as having a deep religious meaning that generates reverence, awe, and veneration and is projected *onto* the icons, which are in turn sustained and treated as special objects of Christian theology, sacramental life and pious behavior. As Philip Sherrard points out:

«To affirm that the framework of belief and worship to which the icon belongs is the Christian liturgy is to say that it is part and parcel of a visual system conveying and giving support to the spiritual facts or spiritual events that underlie the whole drama of this liturgy»⁸.

It is of paramount importance to notice that the place of icons in the Orthodox tradition is closely linked *to* and valued in exactly the same way as the Holy Scriptures, within the sacramental and devotional life of the believers. In this respect, the icons in the Orthodox Church function not only as written texts (books) for the illiterate (John of Damascus), but also as an emotional and educative resort that evokes feelings of strength and liberation. In this sense, it is correct to state that the icons comfort and teach both literate and illiterate believers. As Anton C. Vrame puts it:

«Icons provide the means by which the believer maintains visual contact with the embodied, incarnate, historical Jesus. They remind us that He is always in our midst and help us grasp opportunities for fellowship with Him. Matter has been sanctified by the Incarnation and, therefore, in an appropriate channel for contemplation, veneration, and worship»⁹.

The educational implications of teaching the scope and use of the Orthodox icon in contemporary Religious Education are a good example for the promotion of a sincere dialogue not only between Christians of different denomi-

7. JOHN W. COOK, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

8. PHILIP SHERRARD, *The Sacred in Life and Art*, Ipswich, U.K.: Golgonooza Press, 1990, p. 72.

9. ANTON C. VRAME, *The Educating Icon. Teaching Wisdom and Holiness in the Orthodox Way*, Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999, p. 53.

nations, but also among adherents of other world religions. All categories of students of religions should be prepared to be engaged, according to their developmental capacities, in discussing the meaning of religious symbols and their implications for the lives of the believers to whom the symbols have a special meaning. This educational task, far from being easy, helps all people involved in the enterprise of Religious Education to better understand, respect and appreciate what others think and do with some symbols that have a special and a peculiar (i.e., veneration) meaning for those who belong to a certain religious tradition in which these symbols are in use. The icon, therefore, as primarily a symbol of Eastern Orthodox Christianity is worth presenting and evaluating in the light of its importance within this tradition to all pupils of Religious Education.

In this respect, other similar or relevant symbols from other world religions could and should be explored in order that pupils of Religious Education become aware of and evaluate, by comparison, the importance of these symbols and how people who belong to a certain religious tradition *perceive* and venerate them. The task will be proved fruitful in the context of the teaching process of world religions. For there are other religious traditions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which could testify *to* the existence of objects of veneration with regard to some important figures and objects of their ritual and spiritual tradition.

I would like to conclude this short and eclectic essay by pointing out that one important implication for Religious Education, which might have been brought to discussion, is the delineation of the spiritual meaning of veneration of certain symbols and images, as they are functioning in the various world religious traditions. If the icon in the Orthodox tradition is regarded as one of the primary liturgical objects for the communication between, say, the beholder and Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary, or the saint it depicts, as it is shown through the act of veneration of the icon, certainly it is not a unique phenomenon in the history of world religions. Historians of religions may assure us that most of the world religions, if not all, have examples that verify the existence of ritual objects which reinforce the close relationship between the beholder/believer and the deity they represent. As John S. Strong states:

«In his study *Mans Quest for Partnership* (Assen, 1981), Jan van Baal has hypothesized that every ritual act of veneration has two aspects: the one is turned to the realization of contact and communication with the supernatural,

the other to the expression of awe by the observance of a respectful distance (p. 163)... The observance of a respectful distance can be emphasized in a variety of ways. Physically, images usually have their own space and may be further separated from devotees by a curtain or a screen, or kept altogether hidden. Certain physical stances (kneeling, bowing, prostration), and certain taboos (not touching an image, not gazing directly at it) may serve to express this feeling of awe and distance... Contact with the supernatural, on the other hand, may also be asserted in various manners. Prayers for assistance or benefits of some kind usually assume that some form of communication with the divine is taking place. So too, generally speaking, do acts of praise and offerings, whether these be simple candles lit before an icon, or a gift of flowers to adorn a statue of the Buddha, or live animals sacrificed to an image of an Olympian god, or the full daily toilet of a Hindu or Egyptian deity. In all these instances, the sacred is somehow embodied in the image itself, and the gap between it and the profane has been bridged»¹⁰.

I am convinced that a more analytical presentation of the concept and act of veneration within the context of world religions will further legitimize the importance of the Orthodox icon, not only within the Christian tradition itself, but also within the broad spectrum of world religions. My conviction relies on the fact that contemporary Orthodox theology and pedagogy of the icon tends to exclude the importance of a phenomenological and hermeneutical approach in examining the spiritual significance of the icon. This should be done for the sake of those contemporary seekers of spirituality through religious ritual. In this respect, it should be stressed that assistance is needed from anthropological research findings, in order to enhance the search for more concrete paradigms concerning the act of veneration within various religious ritual, behavior and practice. Moreover, such an endeavour will enable some Orthodox theologians and educators to abandon sooner or later the inward stance, and sometimes arrogance, that they usually exhibit in matters concerning the absoluteness of their theological and pedagogical discourse.

10. JOHN S. STRONG, *op. cit.*, p. 103.