

The metaphysics of the iconic phenomenon

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Abstract:

This study aims to show the metaphysical foundations of the iconic phenomenon, referring both to Christian religious metaphysics and to the classical philosophical sense of this field. After a brief introduction into iconic phenomenon and iconic species, a historical excursion follows in the disputes related to the theology of the icon: iconophilia and iconoclasm. After operating the distinctions between the notions of idol, symbol, myth, prototype and likeness, we go straight to the issue of iconicity, analysing one by one the iconic image, the iconic logic, the occultation of iconicity in postmodernity, the profane occidental iconoclasm, metaphysics of the iconic phenomenon, the icon as a form of transperceptive iconicity and the iconic horizon of the human being.

Key words: metaphysics, iconic sign, symbol, iconophilia, iconoclasm, iconicity, prototype, likeness, icon, logos.

1. Introduction

Etymologically, the word is derived from the Greek word *eikoon* (similarity), related to the *eikoo* word meaning "to resemble." Thus, from the many meanings of the *eikoon* noun, Saint John Damascine selects in his writings the proper etymological nuance of the iconic representation: the icon is a resemblance, a model of someone's imprint which shows the person who is presented. "² The author of *Dogmatics and Logic*, considered to be the last holy father in chronological terms, makes a distinction between various types of icon, enumerating six such iconic species: the natural icon

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² Saint John Damascene, *The Apologetic Treaty (III) on the Holy Icons*, 16, apud Fr. D. Fecioru, *Cultul sfintelor icoane*, Bucharest, 1973, p. 113.

(the son in relation to the father who brought him to life), the ideative painting of the world that existed in God's mind before the act of creation, the human icon, created in His image, the human, material or corporeal representations of the unseen things (the appearance of God, the aspect of the angels, etc.), the symbolic realities that suggest in the Old Testament literature prefigurations, analogies, deeds and things which will be updated in the future (the Ark of the Old Testament as a symbol of the Virgin Mary or the sea, the cloud, etc. as symbols of the The Mystery of Baptism), and finally the icons with the three persons of the Holy Trinity, scenes from biblical literature or virtuous men³.

The major difference between the religious painting and the icon is given by the fact that the latter passed through a process of sanctification, thus constituting a sacred object for worship.

The first attempts to use visual art, images and symbols date back to the second century of Christian era, when Christians withdrawn into catacombs because of persecution against them by the empire authorities, had to resort to such pictorial or rather written representations, because if we consider the etymological meaning of the word eikonography (writing of images), the icon, like other pictorial forms, is a writing, and in the case of the Christian icon, a transcript of biblical events.

The icon is suitable for a multitude of approaches: primarily theological (missionary, liturgical, moral dogmatic, respectively christological, triadological, pneumatological, mariological, eschatological, etc.), or aesthetic, iconographic, archaeological, anthropological, semiotic, philosophical, chemical, pedagogical, etc.

In this study we will focus on the aesthetic categories involved in the art of the icon, but also on the metaphysical background of the iconic phenomenon.

2.The historical background

Originally attacked by some Christian apologists or hierarchs of the early Church, such as Eusebius of Caesarea and Saint Epiphanius⁴, but also by pagan authorities during the iconoclast crisis (725-842), the Christian icon comes victorious out of these disputes. This struggle, on the other hand, also had a positive sense because it forced the Church to clarify its theological, doctrinal position on icon and the arguments for its devotion.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 16-23, *apud* Fr. D. Fecioru, *op. cit.*, p. 113-117.

⁴ Such dilemmatic, pseudo-iconoclastic positions, only a few, of the first Christians are justified, if we consider the historical and cultural context, the hostility to the idolatrous realities of the Roman and Hellenistic religion and Christian iconographic initiatives which, at least formally, typologically and archetypally, adjusted to these pagan representations.

Such doctrinal landmarks have been basically established at the 7th Ecumenical Synod of Nicea in 787, but also before and after this ecclesial event by the Holy Fathers, patristic authors iconophiles theologians such as: Leontie, bishop of Cyprus (died in 702), author of the work *Against Jews, about the worship of the cross of Christ, of the icons of the Saints, of one to the other and of the relics of the saints*, a lost work whose title and some fragments preserved in the Apology Treatise of icon at St. John Damascene or in the acts of the 7th Ecumenical Synod⁵; Bishop John of Thessaloniki, delegated by the pope to the council of 680; St. Gherman, Patriarch of Constantinople (dead in 733); Saint John Damascene (passed to the eternal in 749), author of three apologetic treatises against the iconomahs;⁶ St. Theodore the Studite (died in 826);⁷ St. Nicholas the Confessor (806-815); The confession of Patriarch Dositheus of Jerusalem which, vouched by the council of Jerusalem from 1672, became the official position of the Church.⁸

Along with the archetypal, philosophical, conceptual and cultic dowry, Christianity inherited from ancient religions and cultures (Greek, Latin and Jewish) the pros and cons of the figurative image: iconophilia and iconophobia.

If the Cappadocian theologians accept at the end of the fourth century the use of religious images, for rather catechetical reasons, other representatives of the Church, such as Eusebius of Palestine and Epiphany of Salamis of Cyprus, have an iconophobic position. Instead, starting with the 6th century, religious images are getting closer to icon status, becoming worshiped by Christians.

Later, the cult of the icons was favored by the emperors of Rome. Even if they had mainly political and military interests, they used the image of some celestial authorities, whom they painted in royal palaces. Such gestures were made by Justin II (565-578), Tiberiucus (578-582) or Heraclios (610-638). It is true that the last two emperors carry the icons of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ on the battlefield against the Persian Empire which is, if we have a minimal lucidity and sensibility, a form of iconomachy, of iconic blasphemy. This is a profanation of the icon, a use of the icon

⁵ Fragments of this work are found in the papers/documents of the 7th Ecumenical Synod, in: G.D.Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova, et amplissima collectio*, t. XIII, col. 43, from which were later taken by French theologian Jean Paul Migne in PG 93, 1597-1612.

⁶ See the Greek original in Migne, PG 94, 1232-1420. The translation of these texts is available in Romanian translation at Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, *op. cit.*, Bucharest, 1937.

⁷ Teodor Studitul, *Iisus Hristos - prototip al icoanei Sale. Tratatetele contra iconomahilor*, Deisis Publishing House, Alba Iulia, 1994. The title of this book is established by the translator. The volume includes *The three Treatises Against Iconoclasts*, *15 Issues for the Iconomahs*, *7 Chapters Against the Iconomahs*, and *the Epistle to Plato about venerating icons*.

⁸ See more details about the main springs of icon theology at Fr. Ene Braniște, "Teologia icoanelor", in: *Studii Teologice* IV (1952), no. 3-4, p. 175-201.

for criminal purposes. The oscillations between iconophily and iconomachy continued due to conflicts of the Roman Empire with Arab caliphs: Abd al-Malik (685-705), al-Valid (705-715), Suleiman (715-717), Yazid III (720-724), as well as from political interests.

The same disputes, anathematizations and synodal debates on the icon, followed by the victories and defeats of the iconic phenomenon, continued among the hierarchs. Ultimately, thanks to the genius of some theologians like John Damascene and Theodor the Studite, as well as the efforts of some bishops and iconophilic patriarchs, Byzantine iconology outlines its theoretical, mystical and dogmatic foundations.

The re-iteration of the iconoclastic phenomenon with the appearance of Protestantism phenomenon also impules the scientific study of the icon: the papers of the ecumenical councils are published, and also the treatises of iconophile theologians. The science of Byzantinology is constituted as well. It was to be honored by great theologians and historians of all denominations. Scientific studies and monographs on the phenomenon of the icon appear in the last decade of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.⁹

After 1940, iconographic and Byzantine studies intensify: monographs of André Nicolaevitch Grabar (Byzantine iconoclasm and byzantine art) (1896-1990), Father Dumitru Staniloae's studies on theology and art of the icon (1903-1993), Leonid Uspenski (1902-1987), Christopher von Schönborn (born 1945), Peter Brawn (born 1935), Alain Bensaçon (born 1932), Sorin Dumitrescu (born 1946), Anca Vasiliu (born 1957)¹⁰, France Auzepyn (born 1942), etc¹¹.

⁹ Kschwartzlose, *Der Bilderstreit. Ein Knapf der griechischen kirkhe un ihre Eigenart und um ihre Freiheit* Gotha, 1980; L.Brehier, *La guerelle des images (VIII-XX siecles)*, Paris, 1904; Koch, *Die altchristliche Bilderfrage nach den literarischen Quellen*, Gottingen, 1917, etc.

¹⁰ Anca Vasiliu wrote about the problem of the image in Plato's philosophy and about poetics, rhetoric, cosmology, theology and exegesis of the image at Cappadocian parents. See: A.Vasiliu, *Dire et voir. La parole visible du Sophiste (Histoire de la philosophie)*, Vrin, Paris, 2008; A.Vasiliu, *Eikon. L'image dans le discours des trois cappadociens*, Presses Universitaire de France, 2010.

¹¹ For a more detailed account of the iconic phenomenon from a historical perspective, see Gilbert Dagron, *Histoire du chirstianisme des origins et noses tome IV: Eveques, moines et empereurs (610-1504)*, Paris, 1993, p. 93-198; see also the introductory study of St. Theodore Studite, *În apărarea sfintelor icoane – dosarul unei rezistențe teologice*, translation by deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis, Sibiu, 2017, p. 5-139.

3. Idol, symbol, myth, prototype and likeness

The word eidolon, a diminutive of the noun form, is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) to designate the statues of the false deities which, in the mentality of the prophets, were just idols, simulacra, counterfeits of the Divinity.

Before the known disputes between iconoclasts and iconophiles, consumed in the first Christian centuries and reiterated in Protestantism, the distinction between idol and iconic reality was anticipated in the Old Testament literature: while the idol, the carved image keeps the worshiper in the prison of this world, the symbol directs the being towards a transcendent reality.

For example, between the two Cherubs in the Holy Tent, mentioned in Exodus 25,18-21 or between the brass serpent of Numbers 21,8-9 and the idolatrous deviations of the Mosaic Law, as it was the case of the Golden Calf, there is a huge difference, which St. Theodore the Studite made at the beginning of the 9th century in his apology of icons, directed against the iconoclasts¹².

Idolatry, as Father Dumitru Stăniloae remarked, eclipses the divine preeminence, blocks the access of the being to the splendor of transcendence: "Just because idols symbolize the immanent forces, demonically exaggerated, the myths that personify those forces, justify and apotheosize the passionate tendencies are associated with them. Their cult is related to these myths, animating those passions in people. This brings up the defenders of the icons"¹³.

The religious symbol is not only a connecting term between intelligible and sensitive, but also a dimension of immanent space, which is, in its turn, a symbol in relation to the transcendental reality: "There are two different worldviews, one being the basis for idolatry, the other to consider it as a symbol in its entirety and as an ensemble of symbols. Only Christianity, following the Old Testament, sees the world as a symbol and a basis for symbols, for only Christianity sees the world as relative; only for the Christian the world is not the object of idolatrous worship because it is not the last reality, but beyond it there is another world which it symbolizes"¹⁴.

The Christian philosopher, Nicolai Berdiaev, conditions the nature of the symbol of the existence of two ontological levels, both separated and united: "The symbol implies the existence of two worlds, two orders of being, it would not find its place if there was only one. The symbol teaches us that the meaning of a world resides in the other and that the meaning itself is signaled by the latter. Plotin understands by symbol the union of two in one. The symbol is the bridge connecting two worlds. The being is

¹² PG 99, 336 B.

¹³ Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, "Simbolismul ca anticipare și temei al posibilității icoanei", in: *Învățătura despre Sfintele icoane reflectată în teologia ortodoxă românească*, Basilica, Bucharest, 2017, p. 59.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

not isolated, the symbol evokes for us not only the existence of the two worlds, but the possibility of a connection between them, proves therefore that they are not definitively separated. It delimits them and at the same time unites them. Our natural empirical world has no significance or orientation in itself, it conquers these qualities as long as it is a symbol of the world of the spirit. It does not hold in itself the source of life that makes sense to existence, it symbolically receives it from the spiritual world. It is only reflected, that is, symbolizing itself in the natural world. All that has significance in our life is only the clue, the symbol of another world, in which the very meaning has its root. All that is important in our lives is "significant," "symbolic." The symbolic chaining of the facts from our lives and of the world, saturated with nonsense and vanity, is given to us as a chaining with another world which has an orientation, a meaning, because it is the spiritual world "¹⁵.

According to Berdiaev, the symbol cannot be detached from the myth. The myth is not an arbitrary, false, incidental imagination, but refers to an ultimate reality: "The foundation of the mystical and symbolic understanding is not a philosophical proposal, but a mythological representation. The concept gives birth to the philosophical proposal, the symbol produces the mythological representation.

The religious philosophical knowledge, at the climax of gnosis, frees itself from the yoke of concepts and moves towards myth. Religious philosophy is always saturated with the myth, it cannot be liberated without leaving itself, without leaving its duty. Religious philosophy is by itself a creation of myths, an "imagination." [...] Plato in his most admirable dialogues, *Phaidros*, the *Banquet*, *Phaidon*, and others, states that the myth is the way of knowledge. Plato's philosophy is saturated with orphic myths. The basis of Christian philosophy, although it works through concepts, is the most important myth of humanity, that of Salvation and Savior [...] Myth is an unmeasured reality greater than the concept. It is time to cease identifying the myth with the invention, with the illusion of primitive mentality, with something that is essentially opposed to reality "¹⁶.

The essence of the icon consists of similarity. But a distinction must also be made here. Similarity does not necessarily mean an identity transfer. The resemblance is not about being, but about energy. It is an inseparable, unmixed and unchangeable resemblance that reminds us of the Chalcedonian formula regarding the nature of divine persons.

Christoph von Schönborn tries to make this distinction in his book *Icon of Christ*: "The prototype is not in the icon by being, otherwise the icon would be called

¹⁵ Nicolai Berdiaev, *Christian philosophy test*, translation by Stelian Lăcătuș, in Romanian with title *Încercare de filosofie creștină*, afterword by Gheorghe Vlăduțescu, Paideia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, p. 73-74 .

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

prototype, and vice versa, the prototype would be an icon. It would be absurd, because each nature (that of the model and that of the icon) has its own definition, the prototype is in the icon due to the likeness to the person "¹⁷.

Many icons bear, somewhere in the bottom corner, the painter's signature. This is only justified in the case of a picture, not in the case of the icon. The Icon must remain anonymous. He is not the painter, . The Icon must remain anonymous. He is not the painter, but the image of God's image is painted on him. There is also the idea that an icon is automatically consecrated if the name of the painted man is inscribed on it. But painting an icon does not necessarily mean updating the resemblance. Sorin Dumitrescu does not share the idea of resembling the icon with the name of the painted one: "Many ecclesiastical environments mistakenly believe that what devotes an icon is the inscription of the name of the painted on its golden background, indispensable act for an icon to be recognized as being that person. According to Tradition, when the icon-painter paints an icon, he actually writes a hypostasis in shapes, colors and rhythms, naming plastically an identity belonging to the person of the model. The iconic image proclaims and visually verifies the identity of the person, of a certain name. The description of the way of painting icons demonstrates how improper the claim that the hypostasis represents Christ is; in fact, we are dealing with the spiritual reality of a real hypostatic presence of the Lord, dwelling in resemblance, visually invoked by His iconic Image. It would be right to say the icon represents Christ; but the painted Image itself might mysteriously come first to the call of the Divine Model, and He might have been the first who, through resemblance, would wanted to be with His own presence and power in the resembling image"¹⁸.

Basically, the nature of the name of the painted icon does not provide the resemblance. Iconicity, the iconic resemblance does not spare the painter of skill, talent and major imperfections. On the other hand, from a technical point of view, no perfect copy of the prototype ensures the resemblance, the transfer of sacred power into the icon. God can also hide behind the small imperfections of the icon painter.

Therefore, the sacred chemistry between icon, painter, likeness and prototype is very complex. The realization of the resemblance, the divine authentication, depends on several factors: the painter's grace, inspiration, the will of God, the spiritual life of the painter, his soul, the purpose of the painting, the relationship the painter has with the Trinity hypostasis or the holy painted.

¹⁷ Cristoph von Schönborn, *Icon of Christ*, translation into Romanian Icoana lui Hristos, Anastasia Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, p. 53, *apud* Sorin Dumitrescu, *Noi și icoana*, Anastasia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2018, note 1, p. 53.

¹⁸ Sorin Dumitrescu, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

4. The iconic image

The concepts of iconic sign and iconicity have been used in the last decades in various socio-cultural sciences and contexts, from hermeneutics, advertising, and psychology of communication to consumerism, although their connotation seems to be primarily sacred. The iconic sign needs a different foundation other than a physical and a material one, it sends to another instance that transcends the painter, the aesthetic rules and the matter contributing to such representation.

If in Plato's philosophy man was created in the image of the world, of the macrocosm while the world was created by the Demiurge according to the model of Ideas, paradigms, which makes him inferior to cosmos, in Christianity, man is created in the image of God. For neo-Patristic thinkers, man was not a "rational" or "political" animal, but a "deified animal" (*Zoon theoumenon*)¹⁹. Man is the imprint of God, the "eikon" of infinity, being obviously affected by the sin committed by the primordial couple, but not in an irremediable way. The consequence of the ontological alteration generated by this original fault is the man's stripping of the light of divine glory and the dressing in "leather clothing". This beautiful patristic metaphor captures the degradation of nature and throwing man into a world dominated by suffering and biological death. Exit from this condition will only be possible by descending one of the three divine hypostases in time by assuming the human condition, suffering and death.

The purpose of man in this world is to accept his own condition of interval, the creation of any kind, the choice of good, the communion with his Creator, the love for his fellows, and also the humbleness, facts and attitudes that will reconnect him to the original ontological source.

Postmodern culture attempts against the integrity of the iconic image, inducing axiological relativism in all fields of the spirit.

Fallen *illo tempore* from the state of grace, from the fullness of the divine image, the postmodern man risks falling from the iconic figure into a form of sub-iconicity, precisely because he lost his ability to relate to nature and to the fellow men from an iconic perspective. An oversized ego convicts itself to existential autism, thus obliterating channels of communication with divine energies.

The postmodern man prefers to put himself in the center, to become autonomous, making of his art an expression of this metaphysical alienation, gliding into subjectivity and derision. This explains the aesthetic of the ugly, the absurd, the nonsense, the anguish, the instigation to violent instincts, the deconstruction, the

¹⁹ The Work *The Man, a Deified Animal. Perspectives for Christian Anthropology*, translation in romanian, *Omul animal îndumnezeit*, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2002, by the Greek theologian Panayotis Nellas, is a synthesis of patristic thinking about man, a true Patristic anthropology treatise.

demythologization of classical values, the use of pornography in the artistic discourse, the detachment from authentic art, from the sacred and, implicitly, from the icon.

Paradoxically, we are dealing with a form of occultation of the iconic image, the sabotage of the icon, at a time we live in an era of imagery. But it is a vision deprived by its transcendent meaning, an image that addresses to primitive instincts, not the reflexive sense. It is a generation that sacrifices the contemplative joy in favor of an immediate, peripheral relationship, which produces carnal pleasures, not spiritual joy.

The painter, the artist, like the painter of icons, must himself be spiritually engaged because the divine beauty reveals through him. Any major artwork is an iconic image of another iconic image. The icon is an iconic image of the one who brings it to life, which in turn is an iconic image of God.

The hypertechnical society, marked by hedonism, consumerism, entertainment, mercantilism, pseudoculture altered the aesthetic organ of man, blunted his sensitivity and affected his ability to perceive and value the beauty. Art must make sense, open the mind and the soul towards the horizons of the infinity and prepare the human being for death as the great Russian filmmaker and writer, Andrei Tarkovsky, once said.

In postmodernity the pseudoartists make career, depraved people who make public their carnal instincts, violence, obsessions and schizoid nature, and who, by appealing to image and distorting its iconic meaning, disseminate axiological confusion, life disgust, maintain a state of poisoned nihilism, not only for the soul, but also for the body of younger generations who have no spiritual and cultural immunity and possess little knowledge, fugitively and superficially acquired from phones and tablets. Given the importance of image due to digital techniques and the visual media industry, the misdirection of the spiritual, ontological sense of the image, the contemporary society is confronted with the most aggressive and dangerous form of iconoclasm because it no longer operates theoretically, but fights from the inside of the image, perverting the meaning of image through image. Therefore, we are confronted with an autoimmune disease of the image, with a paradoxical situation in which the image, through its superficial and egocentric executioners, attacks itself.

The postmodern man lives in a culture of the image that engages him only at an epidermal, aesthetic level, being unable to transcend these iconic captures, to have a trans-individual reading, to integrate them into an open thinking towards alterity, into a transdisciplinary and metaphysical iconic logic²⁰.

The Renaissance divorce between art and sacred, the dynamiting of unity between Good, Beautiful and Truth, the cartesian foundation of subjectivity, of autonomy of the self, of the reduction of truth to individual perception led to a malignant art, to a cancerous iconic image.

²⁰ Tomáš Špidlík, Marko Ivan Rupnik, *Faith and Icon*, translation in Romanian *Credință și icoană*, Dacia Publishing House, 2008, p. 8.

5. The faces of the iconic sign

The postmodern man lives the drama of a cosmic, metaphysical **orphanism** (**asta l-ati inventat dvs**) due to the loss of the ultimate sense. The consciousness of the iconic image imprinted in all forms of the creation came to a dormant state. There is the need now to resurrect the sacred conscience, to **iconize** the whole world, to live life in an iconized way, as suggested by Pr. Gheorghe Ghelasie from Romanian Frăsinei Monastery.

The notions of icon, iconic image, iconic being, iconic gnoseology, image, prototype, archetype, etc. belong to the category of the sacred which man can transcend his own condition through. There is a major mutation from word to image in the current cultural, social, economical context: "The spiritual people nowadays (St. Siluan, Sophrony of Essex) brought to the fore the mystical theology and the theological mystic of the icon, because the spiritual battle is now at the level of the image.

The ideational, dialectical, structuralist discourse no longer moves the human heart, no longer penetrates under the bombardment of images which became the main source of manipulation of consciousness. The image is assimilated more quickly and involuntarily than discursive information into the soul memorial. This is why to save and stop the destructiveness of the present world means to restore and develop the power of image to be iconized, the view of the world in the light of God's Image and God's economy"²¹.

The scientific, mathematical, physical or logical acquisitions discovered by scientists in the last century: Einstein's generalized relativity theory (1905), the discovery of the quantum parameters by Max Planck (1900), the principle of complementarity by Niels Bohr (1927), the waving mechanics of Louis de Broglie (1925), Heisenberg's uncertainty relations (1932), W. Paul's invariance CPT (1955), Stefan Lupasco's non-contradictory logic, Basarab Nicolescu's theory of reality levels and transdisciplinary methodology prove the deficiencies, the unilaterality and the superficiality of the Enlightenment thinking that stakes only on the authority of reason. On the other hand, scientists concerned with human issues, their ontological status, their conscious and unconscious, their abisal structures, their spiritual needs: Freud, C. G. Jung, Lucian Blaga, Charles Baldouin, G. Bachelard, Levi-Strauss, G. Dumezil, M. Eliade, H. Corbin, etc. come to recover the "lost paradigm" of being, concretely the specific human nature. This type of approach, which attempts to interrelate all the visions on man and univers, operating inter-pluri- and transdisciplinarily, has more chances to decipher the complex equation of human, cosmic and metaphysical

²¹ Florin Caragiu, *Ghelasie Isihastul*, Platytera Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 122.

reality, rather than the empirical or rationalistic philosophical systems from the past centuries.

In addition to the famous disputes between the iconophiles and iconomahs from early Christian centuries, there is also a form of Western, profane, secular iconoclasm which, undoubtedly, contributed to the crisis of the iconic image of contemporary society.

We consider here the founding of modern physics by Galileo and Descartes, for whom the reason was the only way to find the truth. English empiricism and Newtonian physics represent another moment of secular Western iconoclasm. Kant also claims that there is a distinction between the phenomenal world and thing-in-itself (noumenon) which belongs to metaphysics, and therefore impossible to be known. Realities like God, life after death, the soul remain eternal mysteries, paralogsms, antinomies of reason.

Under the influence of these positivist ideas and enthusiasm, the imaginary comes to merge into a frantic mood, into oniric, arbitrary and irrational fantasies. The French philosopher and writer, Jean Paul Sartre, argues that the image is nothing but a quasi-observation, a void, an infantile degradation of knowledge²².

Finally, the performance of modern technology gave the last blow to the iconic phenomenon: "For more than half a century, a so called video revolution broke out before our eyes – an outburst of image civilization, a perverse effect of scientific and technical iconoclasm whose triumphant result is the positivist pedagogy. The overcoming, if not the end of the Gutenberg galaxy, through the omnipresent reign of information and visual imagery, has consequences whose extensions are barely foreseen by research, for the simple reason that this perverse effect has never been anticipated or taken into account. The image, always underestimated, still does not worry the moral conscience of a West that is believed to be vaccinated by its endemic iconoclasm. The enormous obsessive image production is recorded in the entertainment business. Still, the image diffusers are omnipresent at all levels of representation; from cradle to tomb, the image is present, dictating the intentions of the anonymous or occult producers. The importance of this iconic manipulation (related to the image) does not worry yet. However, all other valorizations depend on it, including that of genetic manipulation. There is also a minority of researchers, fortunately more and more important, interested in studying this fundamental phenomenon of society and the cultural revolution which it involves"²³.

²² See Mirela Ienculescu, *Icoana: chipul sacralui*, Platytera Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010, p. 60-61.

²³ Gilbert Durand, *Aventurile imaginii. Imaginea simbolică. Imaginarul*, Nemira Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 65.

6. Metaphysics of the iconic phenomenon

For the philosopher, logician and American mathematician, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), knowledge is a chain of inference that can be reduced to the significance relationship. An idea exists only to the extent that it takes the place of something else, more specifically, only when it is a sign for an object, which means that the first sign is interpreted by another sign, which in turn needs to be interpreted. Even our ego is a sign that interprets the signs from the outside, from the flow of consciousness. Language is a totality of the self and man is a thought. Any sign requires an explanation, especially the linguistic one which is more vague.

Things can not be known directly, intuitively. According to the American philosopher, the object is only part of the significance relationship, is the representation of a thing whose presence is due to the interpretative sign. In other words, identification of objects can be done only on the basis of concepts, signs. Therefore, cognitive act is nothing more than an interpretation of the signs, with no beginning and no end²⁴.

In his work *Imagine and truth. Essays on the iconic dimensions of knowledge*, published in the PUF Publishing House, in 2011, the semiotician and French philosopher Jean-François Bordron, an emeritus professor of semiotics at the University of Limoges, speaks about the role of the image in the context of scientific knowledge. The image is understood not only as a simple way of referring to the world around us, but also as a space for inscription of symbolic forms. The images provide emotions, aesthetic joy, but also rhetorical exercises, dialectical acts that organize and maintain the flow of our everyday activities, be they physical or mental, artistic or scientific.

In the opinion of J.F. Bordron, the visual iconicity enjoys, for various anthropological and cultural reasons, more interest among the researchers than any other iconic realities ("visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustative, kinesthetic" iconic), but with this trend, we only narrow the field of iconicity, transforming the visual sign into the archetype and interpreting iconicity as a property of signs, when in fact the meaning of iconicity is not in the interior of the iconic sign, but is rather presumed by it²⁵.

Peirce's ideas on the notion of iconicity were rethought by Jean-François Bordron's semiotic theory. It conceives the categories of the American philosopher as phenomenological types that make possible to describe a generative way of

²⁴ See: Anton Hügli, Poul Lübcke (Coord.), *Filosofia în secolul XX*, vol 2: *Teoria științei, Filosofia analitică*, translation by Andrei Apostol, Mihnea Căpraru, Cristian Lupu, Marius Muresan, Marius Stan, p. 17-20.

²⁵ Jean-François Bordron, *L'iconicité et ses images. Etudes sémiotiques*. Paris, PUF, 2011, p. 140.

expression. Iconicity is seen as an intermediate moment between the domain of the index and that of the symbol. For Bordron, the index and the symbol are subjected, by their nature, to rules, while the icon is subjected to forms²⁶.

The French philosopher lists five characteristics that distinguish between the iconic level and the symbolic level:

1. It is not possible to translate the icons the same way it happens in natural languages but there is, however, an intersemioticity of icons, certain equivalences even if they belong to different sensory expressions (music and color, perfume and taste, etc.) ;

2. the icon is out of denial;

3. the icon has no intrinsic individuality or generality;

4. The icon is reducible of its constituent process, has no space-time coordinates;

5. an eventual grammar of iconicity might be a mereological relation, namely the relationship between part and whole, rather than a predatory one;²⁷

Bordron wonders at some point: "Is the world's iconicity provided by perception or has a more general source?"²⁸ For him the likeness is not able to ensure iconicity. In the case of Christianity, things are totally different, as long as iconicity itself is a possible phenomenon only through the image of the incarnate Logos. So we have a transperceptive iconicity.

In the authentic icon, the spiritual dimension must prevail over the bodily one. The lines of the body in iconic representation must go beyond sensuality, carnality and rather suggest the resurrected body: "Iconic morphologies symbolize the state of form free from the three inclinations / dispositions that characterize the" flesh "of the flesh:" the lust of the body, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. " The annulment of the three lustful faculties in the holy content of iconic morphologies is canonically transposed by non-sensual treatment of the volume of space of the image and light, by avoiding the expression which produces spectacular "aesthetics of the accident" formal , specific to morphologies that cultivate the hazard; by the lack of pride of the same morphologies not to impose its abusive figure, without taking into account the priorities of composing the icon, not to display singularly its visual relief, to the detriment of the global, liturgical environment" ²⁹.

²⁶ Maria Giulia Dondero, *L'iconicité et ses images. Etudes sémiotiques*, de Jean-François Bordron, Paris, PUF, 2011, ACTES SÉMIOTIQUES [En ligne]. 2011, n° 114. Disponible sur : <http://epublications.unilim.fr/revues/as/840>;

²⁷ Jean-François Bordron, *op.cit.*, p. 166-167; see also Marius Dumitru Linte, "Iconicitate și limbaj-considerații asupra înțelegerii gestului iconic ca metalimbaj în isihasmul carpatin", in: *Quaestiones Romanicae* III/I, p. 258-261.

²⁸ Jean-François Bordron, *op.cit.*, p. 187.

²⁹ Sorin Dumitrescu, *op.cit.*, p. 150.

The symbol appeared with the fall of the protoparents. If before this ontological accident the primordial couple communicated directly with God, the loss of paradisiac space also affected the quality of divine-human communion, so as the symbol appeared in order to fill the gap between divinity and man. After millennia of symbolic shapes, idols, carved faces, statues, the iconic image erupts into immanence through the incarnation of the Logos.

By establishing the Eucharistic symbol, Jesus Christ offers himself as real food, mediated, only apparently, by the material elements of this form of metaphysical nutrition³⁰.

The Christic image can be seen in its many iconic representations, even if they are different, because His self-offering, His presence in every copy does not spoil the fullness and this is the same with the Eucharist.

Some of the Holy Fathers overturn the terms of the act of iconic creation, suggesting that the true painter is Jesus Christ and the model is the man who, if he has a close relationship with the hypostasis of the Christ, the hypostasis Himself paints Himself through the painter's hands, taking perhaps some of the features of his face³¹.

Icons are not simple pictures, but "deified art signs", matter touched by the grace of the Holy Spirit: "That these are truly divinely blessed, the Christians are the first to prove, the Orthodoxy of Faith which makes them fervently believe that, as long as the gracious presence of the image of the saint / prototype is in resemblance, the image is communicated to the matter which the likeness was painted from, as well as to the support of the icon wood. That is why in the cult of honoring the holy icons there is the practice of touching the painting and wood by the believers when they worship them. The Church's tradition considers the morphologies and the art signs in the icons as wonderful, miracle-maker, capable of doing miraculous things which only God does. They can heal, help, give, bless, or defend " and so on"³².

The Christian Church grants the same degree of veneration to icons as to relics: "While preserving their original identity of art signes, the hand, the face, the heel, or the shin of a painted saint in an icon, possess in addition, like the holy relics, the power to be the operative anatomies, the amazing quality added to their status of art sign / forms by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Until the forms painted in icons, no other painted, sculptured or drawn form in the history of universal culture [...] was not able to obtain the quality and the power of the morphology deified through grace: absolute freedom"³³.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 385.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 115.

³³ *Ibidem*.

7. Conclusions

At the beginning of Christianity, figurative art emphasized the communication of spiritual contents, as it was the symbol of the fish whose Greek name (IHTYS) was a cryptogram of the Christian phrase Jesus Christ, the Son of God the Savior. The illustrative element, the painting of episodes of Jesus Christ's life or miracles, for example, is far more late. The icon has no doubt a Christological basis, consecrated by the Chalcedonian dogma, being a form of Logos-images.

Although the icon is apparently simple: a common piece of wood or painted glass, it still has an extraordinary complex language, similar to the simplicity of Christ's historic destiny: a murdered religious reformer, one of the millions of crimes committed in history. Essentially, in Christian soteriological logic, this crime is capable of radically changing the ontological status of the human being.

The icon is an anamnesis, a spontaneous revelation that makes possible to correlate reasoning with intuition, of the concept with feeling, concentrating in a material object the image of Eternity's encounter with temporality³⁴.

The human being moves in an iconic horizon. Everything is a picture, a painting, a static or dynamic nature, from planets to fruit hanging in trees, from billions of galaxies with billions of suns to anthills. We live in an iconic logic. Everything is icon, from nature to the "icons" of the Windows operating system.

Iconicity does not just have a strictly religious meaning. It could also work in the context of a desacralized society, in a world that accepts the existence of an Intelligent Designer responsible for cosmic coherence, but even in an atheistic world. Even a divine instance, without dogmatic attributes, without singing, cult and rituals, a God's law, constant mathematics, ultimate particle, quantum energetic field insensitive to supplications, candles, incense and bells is not beyond iconicity.

The revelation of such a divine identity could be the human being, endowed with consciousness, intelligence, reason, complexity and infinity of the universe, the mystery. Even the abstention of the ultimate foundation, the metaphysical basis is a form of apophatic revelation. The presence of the divine foundation in history, his concealment, the divine holiday, the march of history towards a pleromatic space or nothingness are also iconic signs for the human being as an actor, spectator/witness and victim of these events.

³⁴ Tomáš Špidlík, *op.cit.*, p. 11.