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Function of Religious Images in Byzantine Iconophile Apologia

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer insight into the theology of holy images by discussing the educational, anagogical and contemplative functions of religious images. The Greek philosophical concept of education, based on the superiority of sight as a means of rising towards truth, is analysed - a concept incorporated by the iconophile fathers into their theology of icons. The coexisting attitudes in Byzantine tradition—which, on the one hand, supported the practice of imageless prayer and, on the other hand, embraced icon veneration, are also briefly discussed. Moreover, the iconophile theory of images as signs or symbols of higher realities is reviewed. In this discussion, the three major iconophile writers of the eighth and ninth centuries serve as dialogue partners: John of Damascus (675–749), Theodore the Studite (759–826) and Patriarch Nikephoros I of



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Constantinople (758–828); reference is also made to other iconophile theologians, such as Patriarch Germanus I of Constantinople and Leontius of Neapolis.

Keywords

iconophiles, icons, worship, prayer, visual perception, iconic and aesthetical theology

Introduction

Once the nature of the image was defined and the relationship between the icon and its prototype was clarified, the iconophiles endeavoured to explain the educational, anagogical and contemplative functions of religious images. These arguments relating to the role of the icons in worship are of fundamental importance because they provide a new, impressive insight into Byzantine theories of knowledge and contemplation. Firstly, the Greek philosophical concept of education, based on the superiority of sight as a means of rising towards truth, was incorporated by the iconophile fathers into their theology of icons.¹

Neither was the cognitive factor overlooked by the iconophiles as an educational means invoked by the icons, especially the

¹ A. Giakalis, *Images of the Divine: The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, revised edition (Leiden: Brill Academic Pub., 2005), p. 56: "Within this framework, the icon as part of the visible world, became a supreme educational instrument of universal power, a permanent substitute open book, unaffected by temporary changes and historical coincidences, which never needed revision, which always remained open and immediately accessible to the educated and the ignorant, and which played the role of compass, pointing towards the truth, its archetype."

miraculous ones. These fathers fully exploited this aspect of icons in their desire to indicate that contact between the Truth and icons constitutes a person's most vivid experience. For them, human knowledge was bounded by the experience of the visible realm; thus any meaningful learning about the spiritual must begin with the physical. Consequently, an icon is fashioned according to the limitations of our physical nature, to enable human beings to think truthfully about God, who is incomprehensible.

It is important to emphasise here the Greek cultural ideal of lifelong education, which raises man towards truth and beauty. The feeling of beauty was seen to explain the very refined culture of the icon: the self-revealing and self-communicating sacrament of the Beauty and Glory of God.² For the Byzantine defenders of images, the acquisition of knowledge was a "journey towards God from where one currently is."³ This journey involves conforming ourselves to the likeness of God so we can achieve relationship and communion with God (*theosis*). In this spiritual journey towards God, religious images are used as visual aids in the first two stages of the Christian life: *praktiki* (the struggle for perfection) and *phisiki theoria* (the contemplation of created order).

1 Visual Perception and Auditory Reception

The iconophiles' view on the aesthetics of religious images was not based primarily on actual observation or immediate experiences; that is to say, it was not empirical. What determined their view, rather, was their awareness of the abyss between the celestial and material worlds and the intense

² P. Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. S. Bigham (Oakwood, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1990), p. 231.

³ N. Armitage, "Knowing and Unknowing in Orthodox Spirituality," *SO* 22, 1 (19 Jul 2000), p. 8 (7-21).

desire to bridge it, revealing its continuous unity. In late antiquity many philosophers and religious theologians conjured several models of bridging this gap. The idea of a hierarchy (or ladder) leading from heaven to earth was a favourite motif frequently appearing in Christian and Neoplatonic formulations. We see this motif, for instance, in Dionysius the Areopagite's influential doctrine on the hierarchy of images.⁴ According to this theory, aesthetic elements (symbols, signs and images) have an important role in the hierarchical system of the spiritual apophatic ascent (or 'uplifting' of man to God) accomplished by means of antinomical 'likening' to and 'imitation' of God. The aesthetic elements are also valuable in the hierarchical system of descent (*kataphasis*), or conveyance of supreme knowledge from God to man through the steps of this hierarchy of celestial and terrestrial orders; this takes place via a process of 'illuminations' or progressive 'light-giving' (*photodosia*) received through the faculty of sight. The result of this vision, iconographically represented, is beneficial for the spiritual life of the Christian. It may even be argued that a sincere placing of oneself before an icon, and the extended 'communication' that takes place through this action between the uncreated energies of the archetype and the beholder who perseveres in faith and prayer, constitutes the highest educational ideal and guarantee for salvation.⁵

The Church fathers also incorporated into their theology of icons the Greek philosophical concept of aesthetics, based on

⁴ A. Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Geoffrey Chapman Press, 1989), pp. 38–40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 57–63.

the Aristotelian⁶ and Platonic⁷ theories of perception. Justified by a demonstration of the benefits of visual perception, this led to an understanding of the icon as an educational and functional instructive craft.⁸

The iconophiles considered visual representations superior to auditory receptions. For them, the spoken word (as a communication medium) is characterised by its rapidity for the hearer, such that it may be distorted and debated. A visual aid, on the contrary, is clear, wider in expression and represents “what is faithfully true.”⁹ The faculty of sight is the principle of sense perception of images, just as the human being is

⁶ I. Block, “Truth and Error in Aristotle's Theory of Sense Perception”, *Phil. Q.* 11, 42 (January 1961), pp. 1-9. Although iconophiles seem to draw from the Aristotelian theory of perception, the view on the primacy of sight over the other senses was not invented by Aristotle; already in Book VI of *The Republic* Plato had expounded on this question.

⁷ K. M. Voght, “Belief and Investigation in Plato's *Republic**”, *Plato* 9 (October 2009), <http://gramata.univparis1.fr/Plato/article86> (accessed 10 November 2013); also Plato, *The Republic*, in: P. Shorey, (trans.), *Plato: Plato in Twelve Volumes*, (trans.), vols. 5 – 6 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd. 1969.), Chapter 7, 518C. On the basis of his familiar doctrine of forms, Plato asserted that sight is by far the most costly and complex piece of workmanship that the artificer of the senses ever contrived. 7b. For although hearing requires only the voice and ear to function, sight required not only colour and eye, but a ‘third nature’ in addition, namely ‘light’ which according to Plato is divine in nature; J. S. Hendrix, *Platonic Architectonics: Platonic Philosophies & the Visual Arts*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2004), p. 142; Hence the summit of the soul's journey to the most blessed part of the reality is almost always conceived in terms of the metaphor of sight by Plato; it is a vision which somehow imprinted upon the mind like an indwelling power which is not forgotten, and it enables those who have glimpsed reality to lead others in the same direction.

⁸ J. Travis, *In Defence of the Faith: The Theology of Patriarch Nikephoros of Constantinople* (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1984), p. 48.

⁹ Nikephoros of Constantinople, *Antirrhethici Tres Adversus Constantinum*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Tomus C, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1866), pp. 381-384 (375-534).

comprised of flesh and blood; as such, it is compelled to confirm through vision that which affects its assurance in regards to the soul.¹⁰ It is because of this view of perception that the iconophiles believed in the absolute priority of the vision of divine realities, understanding salvation as a *vision* of truth.

The priority of sight—and, consequently, of the icon—is not the result of the human choice, according to John of Damascus, but exists by divine Providence. As the images are visual representations “speaking to the sight as words to the ear,”¹¹ they serve as memorials, leading people to remember past signs and to worship the God of wonders. They also raise the minds and the hearts of the faithful up towards heaven,” stimulating and teaching people, especially the more simple.¹² The final result of the constant sight of icons contributes decisively to the constant remembrance of God which, in the perfection and

¹⁰ G. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, (Thomus XII-XIII, Florence: Antonii Zatta Veneti., 1767; repr. Graz, 1960), from here: G. D. Mansi, *Sanctorum Conciliorum*.

¹¹ John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum Calumniatores Orationes Tres*, in B. Kotter (ed.), *Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. 3 (Berlin: De Gruyter 1975); see also D. Anderson, *St. John of Damascus On the Divine Images* (New York 1980); John of Damascus, *First Oration on Images*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Tomus XCIV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1864), p. 1248, (1231-1283).

¹² J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, (Thomus XIII, Florence and Venice: Antonii Zatta Veneti., 1758–98), p. 114; Thomus XIV, p. 188D; Thomus, XII, p. 966B-014D.

salvation of the faithful, constitutes a higher level than the contemplation of being.¹³

According to Theodore,¹⁴ although the sense of hearing and the sense of sight have equal force and are venerable in the same degree,¹⁵ sight precedes oral communication both in the location of its organs and in the perception by the senses, for a person first sees something and then transmits the sight to the sense of hearing.¹⁶ The apostles first saw Jesus Christ on Mount Tabor—perceivable, tangible and visible with bodily eyes—and

¹³ With this passage John of Damascus was continuing the argument propounded earlier by various Christian thinkers, notably by Augustine, *City of God*, in: P. Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, (vol. 2, Buffalo: The Christian Literature Co., 1886-1890), pp. 1-42; Theodoret of Cyrrus, *Historia Religiosa*, in: J.-P. Migne (eds.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus LXXXII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 1284A; and Evagrius of Ponticus, Chapter on prayer, 150; quoted by G. E. H. Palmer, (ed.), *The Philokalia: The Eastern Christian Spiritual Texts*, 4vols. (Athens: Aster, 1961), p. 189.

¹⁴ Theodore the Studite, *Antirrhetici Tres Adversus Iconomachos*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus* (Thomus XCIX, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1864), pp. 327-436; English trans. C. P. Roth, *St. Theodore the Studite: On the Holy Icons*, (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1981); Theodore the Studite, *Antirrhetici Tres Adversus Iconomachos I*, 19, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XCIX, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 392A; see also Theodore the Studite, *Epistle 72 to Nicholas*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XCIX, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 1304.

¹⁵ Theodore the Studite, *Antirrhetici Tres Adversus Iconomachos I*, 17, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XCIX, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 348BC.

¹⁶ Theodore, *Antirrhetici Tres Adversus Iconomachos III*, 2A, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XCIX, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 384D; Theodore the Studite, *Antirrhetici Tres Adversus Iconomachos*, *Patrologia Latina at Graeca*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XCIX, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), 327-436.

then they transferred the perception to the words of the scriptures.¹⁷

Drawing from Aristotle's theory of perception, which places vision above all other physical senses, Patriarch Nikephoros, similarly, acknowledged the advantages of visual perception over oral communication. According to him, things learned by perception are not easily forgotten because the impressions of visual representation are trustworthy, clearer, inclusive and quickly comprehensible, always representing "real things."¹⁸ These sensations leave a distinct mark on one's soul and, thus, remain with it for much longer.¹⁹ The advantage of visual impressions (which make us know and bring to light many differences between things)²⁰ over auditory reception is more noticeably true among the illiterate Christians.²¹ As humankind is fashioned from soul and body, and the soul is not naked but is hidden as if behind a curtain, it is impossible for man to arrive at intelligible things except through corporeal beings. The sight

¹⁷ Theodore, *Antirrheticus Tres Adversus Iconomachos* III, 16A, p. 397AB.

¹⁸ Nikephoros of Constantinople, *Apologeticus Minor Pro Sacris Imaginibus*, 53, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus C, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1967), pp. 725, 748–749, 533–831; Plato, *Philebus*, in H.N. Fowler (trans.), *Plato: Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), pp. 38E–39C

¹⁹ Nikephoros, *Antirrheticus* III, 3, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus C, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1867), p. 318A; Nikephoros, *Antirrheticus* III, 5, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus C, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1867), p. 348B; Nikephoros, *Apologeticus Minor Pro Sacris Imaginibus* 62, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus C, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1867), pp. 748–749A.

²⁰ N. Gorman, "Aristotle's 'Phantasia' in the 'Rhetoric': 'Lexis', Appearance, and the Epideictic Function of Discourse," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 38, 1 (2005), p. 16 (16–40).

²¹ Travis, *In Defence of the Faith*, pp. 48–9.

of the icon guides one to immediate contact with the saving truths and leads to knowledge of them.²²

Patriarch Germanos, for example, argued that the very representation of each person, set down by the painter in the icon, becomes for the uneducated believer a compendious narrative. Just as the discourse that relates the deeds of a good man is often invited in order to excite zealous imitation, the visual means are used to remind the Christians of past events or “valiant men.” Yet, what the word of the story presents through the faculty of hearing, the silent painting shows through imitation.²³ For as often as they (the saints and saving events of the Bible) are seen in iconic representations, in the same degree are those who behold them stirred to the remembrance of the prototypes and to a desire for them.²⁴

For the image defenders, it was from this point of view that the icon constituted a door and a “self-manifested vision” proving to be a real bridge connecting the worshipper with the uncreated energies of Christ and of His saints, an open road linking this world in a unique fashion with the reality transcending it.²⁵ Indeed, for the faithful, the icon appears to be

²² Germanos I of Constantinople, *Epistulae*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XCVIII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1866), pp. 147-222; Germanos I of Constantinople, Letter to John of Synada, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XCVIII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1866), p. 160B; Germano I of Constantinople, *Epistulae*, pp. 147–222.

²³ Germanos I of Constantinople, Letter to Thomas of Claudiopolis, J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XCVIII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1866), p. 172D; G. D. Mansi (ed.), *Sacrorum Conciliorum*, Thomus 13, pp. 113D, 241BD, 116AC, 277C; Thomus 12, p. 1066D.

²⁴ G. D. Mansi (ed.), *Sacrorum Conciliorum*, Thomus 13, pp. 377D, 360C.

²⁵ Stephen the Younger, *Vita Stephani Junioris*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus C, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1866), pp. 1069-1186; Stephen the Younger, *Vita Stephani Junioris*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus C, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1866), pp. 1069–1186, 1113A. See also Theodore the

a pictorial representation of the sanctified reality, through which the faithful are “illuminated inwardly.”²⁶ This sanctifying dimension of beholding the icons was repeatedly emphasised by the Seventh Ecumenical Council, affirming that, “as the faithful, by means of the sense of sight, look at the sacred icon of Christ, Theotokos and the holy angels and saints, they are sanctified, and impress their mind with the memory of them, and in their hearts believe in One God, which leads to salvation.”²⁷ Therefore, it is natural to call the icon holy, a permanent vehicle and stable channel of divine grace, insofar as it preserves its integrity.

In addition to the discussion of perception, which links the iconophiles with the natural philosophy of the ancients, the iconophiles also used scriptural passages in which sight and hearing were juxtaposed in one way or another, the superiority of the sense of sight being affirmed (Is. 6, 1; Ez. 1). Thus, scriptural references to Christ relating to the Father as the radiance or effulgence of God’s Splendour (Heb. 1, 3), or John speaking about Christ (Jn. 1, 1-9) not only as the Word Which ought to be “heard and obeyed; but as Light (...) therefore to be visualised” were brought up in support of the iconophile arguments.²⁸ The title “Light from the Light,” as it became known in the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed, later provided an assurance for the defenders of icons that their teaching was of biblical origin. This, in turn, was linked to the distinction between theology and economy, with its emphasis upon the

Studite, Letter to Naucratus, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XCIX, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1866), pp. 903-1683 (1220A).

²⁶ G. D. Mansi (eds.), *Sacrorum Conciliorum*, Thomus 13, 220E, 273A.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 249E; Thomus 12, pp. 116A, 1006A; Thomus 13, pp.220E, 360B-E, 474C.

²⁸ J. Pelikan, *Imago Dei: Byzantine Apologia for Images* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 114.

Incarnation, providing additional means for the endorsement of the sense of sight.

According to iconophiles, those who lived before the age of Christ had to rely on the prophetic word, conveyed through the sense of hearing. The New Testament believers, on the contrary, were privileged to see Him (Mat. 13, 16–17)—and, therefore, able to represent Him through icons.²⁹

In opposition to the iconophile views, the iconoclasts considered the visual, with all of its implications of boundaries and limitations, to be too close to the material aspects of religion that they criticised.³⁰ Consequently they proposed verbal and symbolic forms as the legitimate media for representation.³¹ The quotation from the Epistle to the Romans in the iconoclastic *florilegium* highlights the emphasis that the iconoclasts placed on the role of hearing, as opposed to that of sight (or, put another way, on discourse as opposed to image). This importance was further manifested in the second, damaged fragment of the last iconoclastic patriarch, John the Grammarian. According to his argument, it is impossible truthfully to distinguish a certain individual by means of depiction, because an image cannot give a complete idea of the individual, being limited to appearance alone and lacking the fuller descriptive language of rhetorical representation.³² In other words, by observing the image, one cannot be sure that a particular person is the one depicted in the icon.

²⁹ John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum* I, 22, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XCIC, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1864), p. 1256A.

³⁰ Constantine V, *Peusis*, quoted by Nikephoros, *Antirrheticus* I, 20, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus C, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1866), pp. 236C, 248D–249A, 250A, 296C.

³¹ Nikephoros, *Antirrheticus* III, 33, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus C, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1866), p. 425D.

³² J. Gouillard; “Fragments inedits d’un Antirrhetique de Jean le Grammairien,” *REB* 24 (1996), pp. 173–175, (171–181).

The *florilegium* attached to the *Horos* of the iconoclastic Council of St. Sophia (815) broadened the scope of John the Grammarian's verbal bias by using the model of *encomia* to define appropriate, adequate and verbal means of representing the saints. It is clear from the text borrowed from the *Encomion on Basil* (written by Amphilocus of Ikonion³³) that iconoclasts borrowed the notion of the impossibility of conveying a true definition by material representations from Origen, who differentiated between "the perception of the senses (*aesthesis*)" and "perception of the reason (*logos*)."³⁴

2 Images in Worship and Contemplation

Many Byzantine fathers saw icons primarily as educational tools for the "less perfect,"³⁵ and not as aids for spiritual contemplation, the latter being achieved through apophatic ascent freed from all images and forms. Both parties in the iconoclastic controversy seem to have been aware of this view—particularly the iconoclasts, who claimed that the superiority of the spirit over matter made it inappropriate to use material images in prayer and spiritual worship. "We believe rightly," they said, "we venerate images in an intellectual manner bringing worship to the intellectual divinity."³⁶

The explicit reference to the intellect here ("in an intellectual manner") evokes the imageless worship in the intellect to

³³ P. J. Alexander, "The Iconoclastic Council of St. Sophia (815) and Its Definition (*Horos*)," *DOP* 7 (1953), pp. 35–57, (35–61).

³⁴ J. Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, p. 104.

³⁵ S. Gero, "Hypatius of Ephesus on the Cult of Images," in: J. Neusner (eds.), *Christianity, Judaism and Other Graeco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty* (Leiden: Brill Academic Pub., 1975), pp. 208–216.

³⁶ G. D. Mansi (ed.), *Sanctorum Conciliorum*, *Thomus* 13, pp. 116D, 229E; *Thomus* 12, p. 1054C

which the iconoclasts appealed. Yet the iconoclasts did not use this as a mystical guide for prayer but, instead, in the strict sense of their disapproval of icons; according to them, the deceptive images tear the human mind away from the sublime worship that benefits God, drawing it to the materialistic worship of the creature.³⁷ The iconophiles, of course, attempted to counter the iconoclastic arguments by distinguishing between the modes of veneration and by elaborating on the sacramental value of the icon. The problem, however, was not so simple that it could be confined to the hermeneutic level, as Byzantine spirituality overall gives support for an immaterial and aniconic Christian worship based on the practice of imageless prayer.

It has often been stated that, in the realm of prayer, the apophatic attitude means that the mind has to be stripped of all images and concepts, so that our abstract concepts of God may be replaced by the sense of God's immediate presence.³⁸ In apophatic prayer, we "let go" of all the contents of our consciousness and, thereby, in a state of passive receptivity and complete freedom of will, cooperate with grace by giving our spirits in full-loving surrender to the Spirit of God and the "Loving Transformation He initiates through actuation of the Gifts of His Holy Spirit, operating in a divine mode."³⁹

A whole monastic spiritual tradition, founded essentially on the scriptures and traced historically in Eastern monasticism (Origen, Evagrius of Ponticus, John of Climacus, Mark the Monk) from the fourth century, and introduced into the West in the same period, was based on the denial of representation and

³⁷ G. D. Mansi (ed.), *Sanctorum Conciliorum*, Thomus 12, pp. 1010E, 959DE, 966BCD; Thomus 13, pp. 116D, 229E.

³⁸ In his *Chapters on Prayer*, Evagrius Ponticus wrote, "If you desire to see the face of the Father Who is in heaven, do not seek to conceive any form or representation at all while you are at prayer." See S. Tugwell, *Evagrius Ponticus: De oratione* (Oxford, 1981), p. 114.

³⁹ K. Ware, "Ways of Prayer and Contemplation: Eastern Tradition," *Christian Spirituality* 16 (1985), pp. 399-400 (395-414).

images of the *noetic* faculty as analogical means of spiritual ascent, though not on the denial of the sensible and material means in general. The nucleus of this tradition was the rejection of “intellectual images”—that is to say, of all noetic representation and thoughts, without exception (not only of evil but also of good things), in order to attain communion with God through prayer.

For instance, Evagrius of Ponticus referred to this method extensively in his works. In the *Praktikos* and the *Chapter on Prayer*, Evagrius stated that the primary goal of the spiritual life is the attainment of spiritual knowledge that transcends both the ordinary levels of consciousness and the subconsciousness. This knowledge is “the knowledge of the Trinity”—that is to say, knowledge without an object exterior to the self, which can only be attained by means of apophatic prayer, cleared of all *noemata*, pure and impure images and thoughts.⁴⁰ Similarly, Nilus the Sinaite counseled his spiritual children not to put their trust in images or pictures that might arise during time of prayer.⁴¹ John Climacus and Mark the Hermit also based the practical method of contemplation on apophatic ascent (discarding of thoughts) for the attainment of union with God.⁴² In order to achieve the pure state of imageless prayer it was recommended not to confront all representational images of created things that enter the mind during prayer, but rather to raise one’s intellect above all things through the invocation of

⁴⁰ Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos* 55, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XL, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), p. 1248A.

⁴¹ D. Trakatellis, “St. Nilus on Prayer,” *SO* 5, 2 (Winter–Spring 1966), pp. 88–89, (35–90).

⁴² Mark the Hermit, *Opuscula C. Marci Erimiteae*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus LXV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), pp. 921D, 1064B; See also John Climacus, *Ladder* 27, 17, , in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus LXXXVIII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 112A.

the name of Jesus.⁴³ Although not knowing, because what is perceived is beyond all knowledge, nevertheless the intellect does know through the Truth of Him Who alone transcends all being.

The invocation, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,”⁴⁴ addressed to the Person of Christ, is “at the same time a prayer, and an entreaty, and a confession of faith, and a giver of Spirit, and a bestower of Divine gifts, and a purification of the heart, and the dwelling of Jesus Christ, and deliverance from sins, and healing of souls and bodies, and a granter of Divine revelations and mysteries to the humble, and salvation itself, because it is the bearing of the saving Name of our Lord. It is expressing our living faith in Him as Son of God who assumed the human nature and dwelt amongst us.”⁴⁵ This mode of prayer, which became accepted by many mystical writers, is commonly associated with the mysticism of the hesychast tradition.⁴⁶

Contradictory as it may seem, this same Byzantine tradition, which spoke extensively on the practice of imageless prayer, also created icon veneration, surrounded itself with images and symbols and, in rich and complex fashion, built up the visible aspect of the Church. This can be confirmed by the fact that many of the ascetic fathers who insisted upon prayer free of images and forms also described the vision of light during prayer (Symeon the New Theologian, Evagrius Ponticus)⁴⁷ and

⁴³ G. E. H. Palmer, *Philokalia*, vol. 4, p. 181; see also K. Perry, *Depicting the Word: Byzantine Iconophile Thought of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 117.

⁴⁴ F. Neyt, “The Prayer of Jesus,” *SO6*, 9 (Summer 1979), p. 643, (641–651).

⁴⁵ On Symeon the New Theologian see P. Velichkovsky, *Little Russian Philokalia*, vol. 4 (Platina, CA: St. Herman Press, 1994), p. 49.

⁴⁶ A. Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, 115.

⁴⁷ W. S. J. Harmless, W. Fitzgerald, “The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The *Skemmata* of Evagrius Ponticus,” *TS* 62 (September 2001), p. 500 (498–529); for St. Symeon the New Theologian, knowledge of God and

encouraged their disciples to make icons of the saints and to venerate them (Gregory Palamas).⁴⁸ The problem is, indeed, formidable because, as the history of Byzantine Christianity makes clear, the rejection of “intellectual images” in prayer does not necessarily entail the rejection of the actual visible representations of the sacred personages, Christ and the saints.⁴⁹ If this is true, then what kind of images must be abandoned during apophatic prayer?

The answer comes from the same fathers who dealt most extensively with the practice of imageless prayer—the spiritual fathers of the *Philokalia*, (the most important book for contemplation and prayer in the Eastern tradition). According to them, depending on the spiritual state of the one perceiving them, the images and thoughts (*noemata*) can either be projections of imagination or products of fantasy. When the recipient of images is in the low spiritual state or is a beginner in the spiritual life, he usually receives images that derive from the middle or lower sphere, and which have nothing spiritual or creative about them. Hence, they correspond to the world of fantasy and not to the world of imagination, properly conceived. These are known as “low forms” and “secular or worldly images” that can easily distract the mind during contemplative prayer and can greatly interfere with the action of the Holy Spirit. Such images capture the faculties of the soul and lead one away from God. It is on this account that the

vision of the divine Glory involves, above all, a revelation of the Holy Spirit in us—the life in Grace, which manifests itself, on the higher plane of eternal life, as light. See V. Lossky, *The Vision of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983), p. 117.

⁴⁸ Gregory Palamas, “A New Testament Decalogue,” *The Philokalia*, vol. 4, pp. 324–325.

⁴⁹ See John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum* I, 12, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XCIV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1864), p. 1241C.

hesychast masters, on the whole, take a negative attitude towards them.⁵⁰

On the other hand, when the recipient is in an advanced spiritual state, images may be projections on the plane of the imagination of celestial archetypes. These are usually referred to as “*noemata* or images from or about God,” or the “conversation of the mind with God.”⁵¹ In this case they can be used creatively to form the images of sacred art and iconography. Now, it has to be pointed out that, at the highest level of spiritual perfection, the Christian leaves the physical realm, in which the spirit is active, so that all movement is at an end, and even prayer ceases. This is the perfection of prayer, called spiritual prayer or contemplation or *hesychia*.⁵²

It is the spiritual silence that is above prayer, and it is the state that belongs to the Kingdom of Heaven. This experience cannot be expressed in positive and negative terms, because it is simply beyond all such terms. Here, the Christian no longer sees images or concepts but, rather, meets God directly, face to face, in an unmediated union of love (*theosis*).⁵³ Those who attain this state of glorification transcend all created words, concepts and experience an ineffable contact with God, who is an indescribable *Hyper-Icon*. When they communicate their revelation to human beings, however, they do use words and concepts.⁵⁴ Although icons take their place alongside words and

⁵⁰ G. E. H. Palmer, *The Philokalia*, vol. 4, 430.

⁵¹ Evagrius Ponticus, Psalms 140, in: J. B. Pitra (ed.), *Analecta sacra spicilegio solesmensi parata*, (vol. 2, Paris: Jouby et Roger, 1876–1891), p. 348.

⁵² For examples of a collection of Christian monastic wisdom, see J. A. McGuckin, *The Book of Mystical Chapters* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002).

⁵³ K. Ware, “Ways of Prayer and Contemplation,” *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff, and J. LeClerq (eds.), *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, vol. 16. (NY: Crossroad, 1988), p. 399 (395–414).

⁵⁴ A. Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, p. 60.

concepts, which are superceded by the human intellect in the process of glorification and divinisation, nevertheless, those who are glorified by the Grace of the Holy Spirit communicate saving truths to others through holy images.

This means that the veneration of the icon is a road we have to travel in order to transcend it. We are not speaking of suppressing it, then, but of discovering its transcendent dimension. This is clearly stated by the main leader of the *hesychast* tradition, Gregory Palamas, in his work *A New Testament Decalogue*. He counsels his spiritual children, “to make, out of love for God, an icon of Him Who became man for our sake, and through the icon they should bring Him to mind and worship Him, and elevate their intellect through it to the venerable Body of the Saviour, that is sat on the right hand of the Father in Heaven.”⁵⁵

The main goal of these images is to stir the soul by the “dissimilarity of representation,” as such, and direct it towards the perception of something quite removed from any representation—i.e. supreme spiritual values.⁵⁶ According to this notion, any material object and any historical event are correlated with the noetic essence by supposition.⁵⁷

3 Images as Symbols of higher Realities

While iconophiles maintained that the sensible and intelligent things of created reality could be known through the medium of human reason and Scripture, they also emphasised the total transcendence and infinity of God, which is inaccessible to the

⁵⁵ G. E. H. Palmer, *The Philokalia*, vol. 4, p. 324.

⁵⁶ M. Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), pp. 159–189.

⁵⁷ Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus* X, 3 in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus III, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), pp. 937D–940AA.

human mind. Thus they developed a dual track for knowing God.

The idea, in particular, that the image may serve the faithful as a channel of communication with the deity received powerful impetus during the iconoclastic controversy. This concept formed part of the iconophiles' great apologetical argument for icons as agents of apophatic knowledge, and as vehicles of power and grace, by which men are led up hierarchically, according to their individual capacity, to contemplation of the divine and to unified deification with God. In its full theological and liturgical explanation, the icon had become perhaps the primary 'door' through which man could behold the holy and the holy could descend on man.

The iconophiles borrowed the theory of icons as symbols of higher realities from Pseudo-Dionysius, who gave a rather detailed account of this theory in other works and letters, especially in the lost treatise, *Symbolic Theology*. According to Dionysius, symbols, both natural and artificial, serve, at the same time, the purpose of concealing (from the non-initiated) and revealing (to the initiated) the Truth. Men must learn to 'see' and correctly decipher the symbol. Pseudo-Dionysius distinguished between the two main categories of symbols: the 'like,' which have a certain likeness with the prototype, and the 'unlike,' or 'unlike likenesses.' It is the latter that he esteemed most highly, for it is with their help that the ascent to the spiritual essences is accomplished with greater ease.⁵⁸

The human spirit, which perceives the 'unlike likenesses,' does not stop at their external forms, as the one that clearly has nothing in common with the object it designates; rather, the human spirit goes on to search for the true prototype. The main goal of such symbols is to stir the soul by the 'dissimilarity of representation,' as such, and direct it towards the perception of

⁵⁸ B. B. Bychov, "Meaning of the Experience in Byzantine Culture" (in Russian), *A* 4,19 (1991), p. 8, (6-18).

something quite removed from any representation (i.e., supreme spiritual values).

Thus, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, who developed the ideas of Philo, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa (his predecessors in the field of allegorical exegesis), many sensible (and even ugly and obscene) phenomena can serve as symbols of high spirituality.⁵⁹ According to this notion, any material object and any historical event is correlated with the noetic essence by supposition.⁶⁰

The same notion of image as sign or symbol of higher realities is found in the writings of John of Thessalonica, which were read at the Seventh Ecumenical Council and which form a part of the fragmentary work, *Contra Paganos and Judaeos*.⁶¹ Two iconophile theologians (namely, Leontius of Neapolis, in his work *Contra Judaeos*,⁶² and patriarch Germanos in *De Haeresibus et Synodis*) also made use of the same argument.⁶³

Following his predecessors, John of Damascus applied the symbolic theory against the iconoclastic claims that iconophiles worshipped images like gods. To the attacks of iconoclasts, he replied that he did not worship matter but the Maker of matter.⁶⁴ Our worship, he continued, is not directed to matter, but through them (the images) to those represented by them.⁶⁵ The images are memorials, set to remind us of the divine

⁵⁹ M. Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea*, pp. 159–89.

⁶⁰ Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus* 10, 3, pp. 937D–940AA.

⁶¹ G. D. Mansi (ed.), *Sanctorum Conciliorum*, *Thomus* 13, 164–168.

⁶² Leontius of Neapolis, *Contra Judaeos*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (*Thomus* XCIII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1864), pp. 1597–1610.

⁶³ Germanos, *De Heresibus et Synodis*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (*Thomus* XCVIII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1864), pp. 77–80, (40–88).

⁶⁴ John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum* I, 16, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (*Thomus* XCIV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1864), p. 1245A.

⁶⁵ *Idem*, *Contra Imaginum* III, 41, p. 1357C.

activity.⁶⁶ At this point, he expanded his argument on icons to embrace all material aids for worship. As God is seen to be worshipped in spirit and truth (whether in the image or in the Book of the Gospels or in the cross or in any other consecrated thing), the material objects are lifted up, through the mind's elevation, towards God. For the mind does not stop at the material objects; that is the error of idolatry! On the contrary, as the iconophiles thought, the mind rises to the prototype through them."⁶⁷

John of Damascus carried the symbolic argument further by focusing on the question of human knowledge of the invisible realm. Citing Pseudo-Dionysius as a patristic authority, John urged that it is impossible for man to think about immaterial things without reference to "analogous material things."⁶⁸ It follows that human understanding is bounded by experience of the visible realm, and knowledge is, above all, travelling through the visible world, deepening our relationship with it and not escaping it.⁶⁹

Invoking the authority of Gregory the Theologian, John claimed that the mind, which is determined to ignore corporeal things, will find itself weakened and frustrated.⁷⁰ Our inability to direct our thought immediately to the contemplation of higher things makes it necessary that familiar media be utilised to give

⁶⁶ Idem, *Contra Imaginum* I, 16–17, p. 1248D.

⁶⁷ P. Henry, "What Was the Iconoclastic Controversy About?" *CH* 45 (1976), p. 27, (17–29).

⁶⁸ Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Caelesti Hierarchia* I, 2, quoted by John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum* III, 21, p. 1341AC.

⁶⁹ John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum* III, 25, in: B. Kotter, *Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. 3, pp. 131–132. See also John of Damascus, *On the Holy Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), p. 79.

⁷⁰ John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum* III, 21, p. 1341AC.

suitable forms to what is formless, shapes to what has no shape and image to what cannot be depicted.”⁷¹

In fact, John declared that we can never dissociate ourselves from the earthly element, nor can we ascend to spiritual things independently of those of the body. “One day we will be able to contemplate our Lord with our own eyes, freed from all material attributes; but so long as we live, we pray to Him not only in the Spirit, but also in figure and in image.”⁷²

The process of this kind of ascent is traced by John to Scripture (Wisdom 3, 5), including Paul’s statement that, “the invisible things of Him are clearly seen from the creation of the world, being understood from the things that are made” (Romans 1, 20).⁷³ Consequently, an icon is fashioned according to the limitations of our physical nature, to enable human beings to think truthfully about God, who is incomprehensible.⁷⁴ It follows that the bodily forms shown in the icon are evocative of the Holy; they enable us to get a glimpse of the Sacred or Divine without fully unveiling it. “The image is a dark glass, according to the denseness of our bodies, and the mind, in much travail, cannot rid itself of bodily things.”⁷⁵ People, it turns out, need images; using images is our way to come to terms with the invisible. In other words, the purpose of the image is to bring about something in the spectator’s mind or soul, to serve as an understandable analogy.

The supernatural power of the icons derives from the fact that they function as a metaphysical bridge between the celestial

⁷¹ Idem, *Contra Imaginum* I, 2, in: B. Kotter, *Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. 3, pp.66–67. The quotation is repeated in John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum*, III, 21, in: B. Kotter, *Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, pp. 123–125.

⁷² John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum* III, 12, p. 1333.

⁷³ John of Damascus, *Dialectica: Philosophical Chapters* I, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus XCIV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1864), pp. 529–532.

⁷⁴ John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum* II, 5, p. 1288A.

⁷⁵ John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum* II, 5, p. 1288B.

and terrestrial worlds, leading us to knowledge and understanding by “enabling us to perceive hidden things”. Our desire to know visually and to perceive what is beyond the realm of physical objects results from our very nature; it belongs to the basic human condition, according to John of Damascus.⁷⁶

Moreover, John believed that this desire can, at least to some extent, be fulfilled. The divine plan of creation assures us of this. It serves the genuine knowledge of the Creator Who, in the Incarnation, “clothed Himself in creation”; it portrays, “the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes by partaking of flesh and blood.”⁷⁷ Hence, the image makes invisible things known and leads us quickly towards the love and remembrance of God.⁷⁸

The individual’s instinctive desire or longing (*pathos*) for God and the things of God, which is directed to acquisition of divine knowledge and the practice of the faith, is preserved through the making of icons.⁷⁹ Lead by the divine longing and by the spirit, the faithful manifest their love towards God by representing Christ iconographically.⁸⁰ Thus icons offer knowledge of the incarnate Son of God through the senses.⁸¹ Through the representation of images we look upon the bodily form of Christ, and by contemplating it, we form some notion of His divine Glory.⁸²

⁷⁶ Idem, *Dialectica*: Philosophical Chapters III, 4-5, pp. 533B–536C.

⁷⁷ Idem, *Dialectica*: Philosophical Chapters I, 4, p. 1226BC.

⁷⁸ Nikephoros, *Antirrheticus* I, 41, pp. 312C–313A.

⁷⁹ Nikephoros, *Apologeticus Minor Pro Sacris Imaginibus* 80- 81, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, (Thomus C, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1866), p. 808 (533-831).

⁸⁰ Nikephoros, *Antirrheticus* II, 27–28, p. 372.

⁸¹ John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum* III, 12, pp. 1333–1341; also P. J. Alexander, *The Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople: Ecclesiastical Policy and Image Worship in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 254.

⁸² John of Damascus, *Contra Imaginum* III, 12, p. 1333.

It could be stated that, in the icon, the unity of the heavenly and the earthly is really accomplished, along with the communion (*sobor*) of all creatures before the Face of God.⁸³ The icon is, therefore, the last arrow of human *eros* shot at the heart of Mystery.⁸⁴ It rightly “sanctifies the eyes of those who see and raises the intelligence to mystical *theognosia*.”⁸⁵

Conclusion

In a discussion of aesthetics, which links them to the natural philosophy of the ancients, the iconophiles commended the superiority of visual perception, as opposed to auditory reception. The concept of imagery for the perpetuation of memory and as a reminder of historical presence was particularly stressed. As so often, the iconophile polemic cited Basil the Great to authorise the use of images as memorials. This function of art was closely akin to the use of imperial imagery, which continued during iconoclasm. If the image and the emperor could be one (for the image does not cause a multiplication of the emperor), the same was held true for the divine Logos and for God.

The use of sensible things as a means of ascending to God and to the saints also makes them instruments for communion with the divine, a ‘contact’ that brings participation in sanctification. The Church, therefore, has accepted the composition and

⁸³ B. B. Bychkov, “Meaning of the Experience in Byzantine Culture,” pp. 6–18.

⁸⁴ J. Chryssavgis, “The Notion of Divine *Eros* in the Ladder of St. John Climacus,” *SVTQ* 29, 3 (1985), pp. 194–196 (191–201).

⁸⁵ J. Guillard, “Le Synodicon de l’Orthodoxie”, *Travaux et Memoires* 2 (1967), pp. 134–5; A copy of the original text is found in a manuscript written in 1110 or 1111, trans. A. Louth; kept at the British Library (manuscript 28816).

execution of icons in order to enable men to raise their minds to God and to participate in sanctification.

Just as, in the Bible, we listen to the Word of Christ and are sanctified, in the same way, through the painted icons, we behold the representation of His human form, of His miracles and His passion, and we are likewise sanctified, fully reassured, imbued with joy and pronounced blessed; thus we respect, honour and venerate His human form. And beholding His human form, we contemplate, as much as we can, the Glory of His Deity. Therefore, it can be stated that Christ, while visible to man “by means of the curtain” (in His flesh), made the divine Nature, even though this remained concealed, manifest through signs.

By pointing to the spiritual phenomena of the celestial world, which are beyond representation, the icon uplifts the human mind and spirit to that world, unites it with the latter and allows it to share in the infinite delight of the spiritual creatures that surround the throne of the Lord. The icon, therefore, has contemplative and anagogical functions. It is the object of prolonged and deep kataphatic contemplation that helps to initiate spiritual concentration and leads to meditation and spiritual ascent. It is, in its essence, beyond time and space, and in it the believer finds the eternal spiritual cosmos, participation in which is the goal of life for a member of the Orthodox community.