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– izvoare ale vieții veșnice

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**I**  
**SECȚIUNEA BIBLICĂ**





# Hermeneutics of icons

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It was in the course of making the case for the icons that Nicephorus, Patriarch of Constantinople, spoke about the melody of theology. But it is clear that not everybody has ears to hear this melody. In Protestant circles the veneration of the icons is considered a Byzantine corruption of Orthodoxy. Adolf von Harnack, for example, writes: "The case for the icons as presented by Theodore of Studios was an amalgam of superstition, magic, and scholasticism". As an answer to such a negative stand, Jaroslav Pelikan, the eminent Orthodox expert on Church history of doctrine, wrote in the *Icon* entry, of his *Theological Dictionary*, that Harnack did recognize, and regret, that "all of orthodoxy is summarized in the cult of images".

Indeed, the use of icons has a deep theological significance. Or, better, the icons are themselves theology, word about God, intended to bring man to the "face to face" vision of God, which transcends words, concepts and images. The painting and the veneration of icons involve a visual representation of the entire history of salvation. The creation of man in the image of God, his recreation in Christ, his transfiguration and eschatological glory, are all, in a certain sense, present in "the holy icons of Christ, of all-pure Virgin and the saints, whether depicted on the walls, on wooden panels or on holy vessels", as it is said in the *doxasticon* hymn of Vespers of the Feast of Orthodoxy.

## Concise history of the debate on icons

Speaking of icons, we have to think not only to the contemporary situation and differences between different Churches. Our seminar on icons cannot avoid the reference to the very important – at least for us, Orthodox – of the hot debate on icons and their place in Christian theology and practice which took place during the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries, to the councils and fathers of this period.

The iconoclastic period in the Eastern (Byzantine) world began in 726, when Emperor Leo III the Isaurian, influenced by some bishops from Minor Asia, openly took position against the veneration of icons. Even before the explicit manifestations of iconoclasm, the Patriarch St Germanus wrote three dogmatic

epistles to the iconoclastic bishops. The Emperor's attack represented an illegitimate intervention of civil power in the realm of the Church<sup>1</sup>. To this act of caesaropapism, St John of Damascus responded with his three treatises *In the defense of Holy Icons*. The Pope Gregory II, like the Patriarch, refused to submit to the emperor, and, in 727, he called together a council which confirmed the veneration of icons, referring to the tabernacle of the Old Testament and to the image of cherubim in it. After that, the struggle was primarily concentrated in the Church of Constantinople (the other patriarchs of the East were, at the time, under Moslem rule, so that the Byzantine Emperor was not in the situation of persecuting them).

The first period of iconoclasm reached its paroxysm during the reign of Constantine Copronymos, the son of Leo III (741-755). Constantine himself wrote a treatise in which he summarized the iconoclastic doctrine. The council he called in 754, in Hieria, attended by iconoclast bishops, decided that whoever painted or possessed icons will be deprived of his priesthood if he were a priest, and excommunicated if he were a monk or a layman. At the same time, the confessors of Orthodoxy, St Germanus, St John of Damascus and St George of Cyprus were excommunicated<sup>2</sup>. But the faithful did not renounce the veneration of icons. They leaders, who were mostly the monks, were fiercely persecuted. Tens of thousands of monks emigrated (mostly in Italy).

This was the situation until 780, when Irene, widow of Leo IV, came to the throne with her underage son, Constantine. Together with the new patriarch Tarasius (784-806), the empress begun the preparations for the Seventh Ecumenical Council which will be convened in Nicaea in 787. During the first three sessions the Patriarch Tarasius gave an account of the events that had led up to the Council, the papal and other letters were read out, and many repentant Iconoclast bishops were reconciled. The fourth session established the reasons for which the use of holy images is lawful, quoting from the Old Testament passages about images in the temple (Exodus 25:18-22; Numbers 7:89; Ezekiel 41:18-19; Hebrews 9:5), and also citing a great number of the Fathers. Euthymius of Sardes at the end of the session read a profession of faith in this sense. In the fifth session some Iconoclast misquotations were exposed, their books burnt, and an icon set up in the hall in the midst of the fathers. The sixth session was occupied with the Iconoclast synod of 754; its claim to be a general council was denied, because neither the pope nor the three other patriarchs had a share in it. The decree of that synod was refuted clause by clause. The

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<sup>1</sup>“I am an emperor and priest” (*basileus kai hiereus eimi*), Emperor Leo III wrote to Pope Gregory II (Mansi XXI, 975).

<sup>2</sup>Mansi XIII, 356C-D.

seventh session drew up the symbol (*horos*) of the council, in which, after repeating the Nicene Creed and renewing the condemnation of all manner of former heretics, from Arians to Monothelites, the fathers make their definition. Images are to receive veneration (*proskynesis*), not adoration (<sup>3</sup>*latreia*); the honour paid to them is only relative (*schetike*), for the sake of their prototype. Anathemas are pronounced against the Iconoclast leaders; Germanus, John of Damascus, and George of Cyprus are praised: “The Trinity has made these three glorious” (*he Trias tous treis edoxasen*).

It is worth to quote here from the *Decree of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*:

“To make our confession short, we keep unchanged all the ecclesiastical traditions handed down to us, whether in writing or verbally, one of which is the making of pictorial representations, agreeable to the history of the preaching of the Gospel, a tradition useful in many respects, but especially in this, that so the incarnation of the Word of God is shown forth as real and not merely phantastic, for these have mutual indications and without doubt have also mutual significations.

We, therefore, following the royal pathway and the divinely inspired authority of our Holy Fathers and the traditions of the Catholic Church (for, as we all know, the Holy Spirit indwells her), define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God, and on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on hangings and in pictures both in houses and by the wayside, to wit, the figure of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, of our spotless Lady, the Mother of God, of the honourable Angels, of all Saints and of all pious people. For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honourable reverence (*aspasmon kai timetiken proskuehsin*), not indeed that true worship of faith (*latreian*) which pertains alone to the divine

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<sup>3</sup> The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council speak of real adoration, supreme worship paid to a being for its own sake only, acknowledgment of absolute dependence on some one who can grant favours without reference to any one else. This is what they mean by *latreia* and they declare emphatically that this kind of worship must be given to God only. It is sheer idolatry to pay *latreia* to any creature at all. In Latin, *adoratio* is generally (though not always; see e.g. in the Vulgate, 2 Samuel 1:2 etc.) used in this sense. Since the council especially there is a tendency to restrict it to this sense only, so that *adorare sanctos* certainly now sounds scandalous. So by *adoration* we now always understand the *latreia* of the Fathers of the Second Nicaean Council. From this adoration the council distinguishes respect and honourable reverence (*aspasmos kai timetike proskynesis*) such as may be paid to any venerable or great person – the emperor, patriarch, and so on. A fortiori may and should such reverence be paid to the saints who reign with God. The words *proskynesis* (as distinct from *latreia*) and *douleia* became the technical ones for this inferior honour. (See: *Veneration of Icons*, in “The Catholic Encyclopaedia”).

nature; but to these, as to the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross and to the Book of the Gospels and to the other holy objects, incense and lights may be offered according to ancient pious custom. For the honour which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented. For thus the teaching of our holy Fathers, that is the tradition of the Catholic Church, which from one end of the earth to the other hath received the Gospel, is strengthened”<sup>4</sup>.

Another wave of iconoclast persecution started in 837, under the Emperor Theophilus and with the coming to the patriarchal throne of John the Grammarian. When Theophilus died, in 842, his widow Theodora became regent for his son Michael III. She was Orthodox, and the veneration of icons was decidedly reestablished by a council held in Constantinople in 843, under Patriarch St Methodius (842-846). The council confirmed the dogma of the veneration of icons which had been established by the Seventh Ecumenical Council, excommunicated the iconoclasts and established, in March 843, the feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy on the first Sunday of the Lent.

## Two great theologians of the icons during the iconoclast controversy

In the short historical presentation above, some names of Church Fathers of the time were mentioned. Most of all, the writings of St John of Damascus, and of St Theodore of Studios (or the Studite), represent a genuine summary of Orthodox theology of icons.

*St John of Damascus*<sup>5</sup> was the last of the Greek Fathers. Born at Damascus, about 676, he died some time between 754 and 787. The name of John's father was Mansur. According to the little we know of him, this Mansur was good Christian whose infidel environment made no impression on his religious fervour. Apparently his adherence to Christian truth constituted no offence in the eyes of his Saracen countrymen, for he seems to have enjoyed their esteem in an eminent degree, and discharged the duties of chief financial officer for the caliph, Abdul Malek. When the future apologist of icons had reached the age of twenty-three his father cast about for a Christian tutor capable of giving his sons the best education the age afforded. In this he was singularly fortunate. Standing one day in the market-place he discovered among the captives taken in a recent raid on the shores of Italy a Sicilian monk named

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<sup>4</sup> *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, in “Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers”, second series, vol. 14, ed. By Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1900, 2<sup>nd</sup> printing 1995, p. 550.

<sup>5</sup> See the article on *St John Damascene*, in “The Catholic Encyclopaedia”.

Cosmas. Investigation proved him to be a man of deep and broad erudition. Through the influence of the caliph, Mansur secured the captive's liberty and appointed him tutor to his sons. Under the tutelage of Cosmas, John made such rapid progress indifferent sciences, but also in music, astronomy, and theology. On the death of his father, John of Damascus was made *protosymbulus*, or chief councillor, of Damascus. It was during his incumbency of this office that the Church in the East began to be agitated by the first mutterings of the Iconoclast heresy. In 726, despite the protests of Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople, Leo the Isaurian issued his first edict against the veneration of images. From his secure refuge in the caliph's court, John Damascene immediately reacted against him, in defence of this ancient usage of the Christians. Not only did he himself oppose the Byzantine monarch, but he also stirred the people to resistance. In 730 the Isaurian issued a second edict, in which he not only forbade the veneration of images, but even inhibited their exhibition in public places. To this royal decree St John replied with even greater vigour than before, and by the adoption of a simpler style brought the Christian side of the controversy within the grasp of the common people. A third letter emphasized what he had already said and warned the emperor to beware of the consequences of this unlawful action. Naturally, these powerful apologies aroused the anger of the Byzantine emperor. During this time St John had heard a call to a higher life, and entered the monastery of St. Sabas, some eighteen miles south-east of Jerusalem. After the usual probation, John V, Patriarch of Jerusalem, conferred on him the office of the priesthood. In 754 the pseudo-Synod of Constantinople, convened at the command of Constantine Copronymus, the successor of Leo, confirmed the principles of the Iconoclasts and anathematized by name those who had conspicuously opposed them. But the largest measure of the council's spleen was reserved for St John of Damascus. He was called a "cursed favourer of Saracens", a "traitorous worshipper of images", a "wronger of Jesus Christ", a "teacher of impiety", and a "bad interpreter of the Scriptures". At the emperor's command his name was written "Manzer" (*Manzeros*, a bastard). But the Seventh General Council of Nicea (787) made ample amends for the insults of his enemies, and Theophanes, writing in 813, tells us that he was surnamed Chrysorrhoeas (golden stream) by his friends on account of his oratorical gifts. In the pontificate of Leo XIII he was enrolled among the doctors of the Church. His feast is celebrated on 27 March.

The most important and best known of the works of St John of Damascus is that to which the author himself gave the name of "Fountain of Wisdom" (*Pege gnoseos*), the first attempt at a *summa theologica* that has come down

to us<sup>6</sup>. The teaching of the Church on the important subject of icons is explained by St John of Damascus in his three *Treaties in the Defense of Holy Icons*<sup>7</sup>.

**Theodore the Studite** (or: of Studios) was a monk from Constantinople who managed several monasteries in the Byzantine Empire during the iconoclast controversy which raged in Byzantium during the eighth and ninth centuries. *On the Holy Icons* by St Theodore<sup>8</sup> is an interesting, and extremely dense, treatise defending the Eastern Orthodox tradition of icon veneration. In this book, Theodore elaborates on the relation of the image to the prototype. The image belongs to the Aristotelian category of relative things, and so it directs the attention from itself to its prototype. The image and the prototype are different in essence, but share the same likeness and are called by the same name. Insofar as the image is like its prototype, the prototype may be venerated in the image. This applies to the iconoclast case that the veneration of Orthodox believers to icons is a form of or equivalent to idolatry. If an icon is venerated, Christ is still being worshiped. The actual veneration paid toward the icon is not the same as worship offered to God but an honour and form of high respect to the One who is depicted thereon.

Theodore organizes his polemics into three sections. The first section gives an apology for the Orthodox position on icons, defining what exactly is being done when an Orthodox believer venerates an icon. It is similar to the same veneration paid to the sign of the cross, which was maintained by the iconoclasts. Theodore also goes to extreme length in order to prove that the Incarnate Christ was “circumscribable” and thus having the quality to be depicted using physical artistic forms. Christ was a man who lived and walked on earth, was seen by men, wore clothing, ate food and continued to do so even after His resurrection. Therefore, the Incarnate Word was of circumscribable essence and can be pictured with legitimacy. At the end of the first section, Theodore anathematizes as heretics those who deride and condemn the Orthodox veneration of icons. Theodore’s second section presents a hypothetical

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<sup>6</sup> John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*. Post Nicene Fathers, Schaff Edition Volume IX, Series II, trans. by S. D. F. Salmond, 1898.

<sup>7</sup> St. John of Damascus *De imaginibus, oratio I, II, III*, PG 94, 1231-1420. In English: St. John Damascene, *On holy images, followed by three sermons on the Assumption*, trans. by Mary H. Allies, London: Thomas Baker, 1898; and St John Of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, trans. by David Anderson, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980. We’ll make reference mostly to these three treaties.

<sup>8</sup> English edition: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1891, with an introduction by Catherine Roth.

dialogue between a heretic (iconoclast) and an Orthodox on the Biblical and patristic theology behind the issue in question. The third section goes on further to define, using specific examples from the Gospels, of Christ's ability to be circumscribed. Throughout all of the treatises, Theodore also painstakingly differentiates between icon veneration and worship of God. The honour given to the icon is honour given to Christ, and conversely, the dishonour shown toward icons is also a dishonour to Christ. Theodore uses an interesting example about desecrating an icon of Christ in imitation of the sufferings undergone by Christ during His trial and crucifixion.

Needless to say, the Mother of God and other saints are also to be depicted in icons, and veneration must be shown to these icons, too. The images of saints are worthy of veneration because they have shared in God's divine grace and have become "sons of God" in a figurative sense. In the theology of St Theodore, as in that of his predecessor, iconoclasm is presented as a serious error, which alienates its followers from God as much as any other major heresy.

**Summarizing the theology of icons which was developed during the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries, the following points are the most important:**

– The icon is not an idol, as the iconoclasts were thinking. There is a big difference between an icon and an idol. The idol is seen as a god in itself or as pointing to a god other than the God of Israel. The icon only points to another person that cannot be present with us. The icon makes present a heavenly reality. The icons are rightly considered to be "windows into Heaven". The physical pictures of the saints and Christ remind us that they are alive, that the saints are a "cloud of witnesses" surrounding us, and that we are joining them in worship around the throne. The reality of the saints is pointed to by the icons of them in our midst. Greeting the saints by venerating their icons adds to the reality of our heavenly worship. Just as we might take out a photograph of one of our dear ones and kiss it, the bowing and kissing of icons is not directed at the inanimate, lifeless picture before us, but to the saint, alive and well in heaven to whom we are giving this greeting and respect to.

– Making the icons by Christians and the veneration of icons are based on the Incarnation of the Son of God. I quote here two hymns from the Orthodox liturgy: the *kontakion* and the third *sticheron* of Vespers of the Feast of Orthodoxy:

"The uncircumscribed Word of the Father became circumscribed, taking flesh from thee, O Theotokos, and He has restored the sullied image to its ancient glory, filling it with the divine beauty. This our salvation we confess in deed and word, and we depict it in the holy icons".

"Thou who art uncircumscribed, O Master, in Thy divine nature, wast pleased in the last times to take flesh and be circumscribed; and in assuming flesh, Thou hast also taken on Thyself all its distinctive properties. Therefore we depict the likeness of

Thine outward form, venerating it with an honour that is relative. So we are exalted to the love of Thee, and following the holy traditions handed down by the apostles, from Thine icon we receive the grace of healing”<sup>9</sup>.

“The uncircumscribed Word of the Father, taking flesh, became circumscribed”, says the first hymn<sup>10</sup>. Studying the issue of icons we can easily realise that the whole matter has a christological dimension. The use of icons forms an integral part of the doctrine of the Incarnation. The main question could be formulated as follows: was Christ, the incarnate Logos of the Father, circumscribed or uncircumscribed? The iconoclasts declared that Christ was uncircumscribed, as God-Man, for the unity of divinity and humanity allowed no room for depicting him. According to the theology of iconoclasts, as it is presented at the Council of Hieria (754)<sup>11</sup>, the iconographer painting “an icon of Christ represents either his humanity, separating it from the divinity, or both the humanity and the divinity of the incarnate Logos. In the first instance he is a follower of Nestorius, while in the second he confuses divinity and humanity and follows the Monophysites; even worse, he assumes that the uncircumscribed divine nature can be circumscribed by humanity, which is of course blasphemous”<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, London 1978, pp. 306 and 300.

<sup>10</sup> It is believed that this *kontakion* dates no earlier than the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but it is possible that it is contemporary with the canon of the feast, written by St Theophanes the Marked, a confessor of Orthodoxy during the second iconoclastic period (first part of 9<sup>th</sup> century). It is to be observed that this hymn is addressed to the Mother of God, because the incarnated Son of God borrowed the possibility of being represented from His mother. “Since Christ was born of the indescribable Father – explains St Theodore the Studite – He cannot have an image. Indeed, what image could correspond to the divinity whose representation is absolutely forbidden by Holy Scripture? But from the moment Christ is born of a describable mother, He naturally has an image which corresponds to that of His mother. If He could not be represented by art, this would mean that He was not born of a representable other, but that He was born only of the Father, and that He was not incarnate. But this contradicts the whole divine economy of our salvation” (*Antirrheticus I*, chap. 2, PG 99, 417C).

<sup>11</sup> The Acts of the Council of Hieria are preserved in the minutes of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787): *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, in “Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers”, second series, vol. 14, ed. By Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1900, 2<sup>nd</sup> printing 1995, pp. 533ff.

<sup>12</sup> For the iconoclastic doctrines, see J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology. Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, New York 1974, p. 44; G. FLOROVSKY, “The Iconoclastic Controversy”, in *Christianity and Culture*, Belmont, Mass. 1974, pp. 101-119; and most of all Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, vol. 1, trans. By Anthony Gythiel, with selections trans. by Elisabeth Meyendorff, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 1992, pp. 119-150 (chap. 9: “The Teaching of the Iconoclasts and the Orthodox Response”).