

Theology of the Icon in the 20th Century Neo-Patristic Synthesis

The 20th century represented a paradigm shift in the Orthodox theology through the rediscovery of the Biblical and Patristic sources, and the theological method centred on the experience and spirit of the Church Tradition. The Orthodox theology assumed the path of renewal and delimitation from the influence of medieval scholasticism, of legalism and abstraction of concepts. The recourse to the Biblical and Patristic sources was made not simply from historical positions, but from the spirit and theological method of the Fathers through a unitary hermeneutics which the dogma-spirituality and cult of the Church were integrated in¹. Practically, the Orthodox theology reaffirmed its openness to ecclesial experience without abandoning the role and value of reason and rationality, of history and body, of matter and world.

Refocusing the Orthodox theology from the 20th century on the method of Biblical and Patristic theology and experience showed the paradoxical dimension of dogmas, of reality itself and of the Church and experience with God. Among the prominent representatives of the 20th century who made decisive contributions to the renewal of the Orthodox theology, we recall: Dumitru Stăniloae, Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, Iustin Popovici, Ioannis Romanides, Leonid Uspensky, Paul Evdokimov, Alexander Schmemmann. In the thinking of these theologians, the essential themes of Orthodox theology have been renewed and deepened in connection with

¹ See Pr. Prof. Dr. Cristinel Ioja, *Dogmatică și Dogmatști. Prolegomena privind aprofundarea Teologiei Dogmatice Ortodoxe în România în a doua jumătate a secolului al XX-lea și începutul secolului al XXI*, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2017, p. 21-28; Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers. From the Philokalia to the present*, SPCK, London, 2015; S. S. Horuzhy, *Neo-Patristic Synthesis and Russian Philosophy* in St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly, 44, (2000), 3-4, p. 309-328; Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *From the „Return to the Fathers” to the need for a Modern Orthodox Theology* in St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly 54:1 (2010), p. 5-36; Ioan I Ică jr, *Sensul exemplar al unei vieți și opere: lupta pentru teologie*, Studiu introductiv la Vladimir Lossky, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, trad. Maria Cornelia Oros, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1995

the Church's prayer and sacramental life, with the dogmatic and spiritual thinking of the Fathers, and with the ethos of the Eastern Tradition.

The theology of the icon occupied an important place in the concerns of the mentioned theologians who are outstanding representatives of the *neo-patristic synthesis*. They have brought significant theological contributions in explaining the role and place of the Orthodox Icon, and its dogmatic, spiritual, experimental and ecclesial significances. All these contributions have taken place against the backdrop of a century characterized by technological and social mutations, conflagrations and a galloping secularization of the world, in the context of rediscovering the Orthodox icon in the West and of the ecumenical dialogue. The theology of the icon was deepened by the representatives of neo-patristic synthesis in close unity with the Christological and triadological dogma, with the ecclesial and sacramental-eschatological aspect of Dogmatics and Spirituality; with the hymnographic and liturgical texts of the Church, but also with the exigencies and symbolic meanings of Byzantine art, rediscovered in correspondence with the dogmas of the Church, after the Western influences of several centuries in the art and painting of the Orthodox Church.

The contributions of these theologians are of special importance not only because they rediscover the theological significance of the Orthodox icon that the dogma, the ethos and the life of prayer of the Orthodox Church are transmitted through. They are also important because through profound interpretation, in correspondence with the anthropology of deification, they provide an authentic, ascetic and spiritual alternative to the challenge of the present world images. The Church's response to the inflationary media coverage of the secularized world focuses on the theology of icons, and on the image of the Church. To the present so-called "global screen"² of the images of the world, the Church offers the paradoxical alternative of the immanent-transcendent images of the Church, referring to the historical-eschatological paradigm of man, of the whole man, created in the image of the One who is unseen and eternal.

Therefore, the representatives of neo-patristic synthesis did not approach the meaning of the icon only from a theological perspective with ecclesial and experimental implications, but also from the perspective of a testimony in history, society and world of the importance of the image as the presence of the uncreated in the created, of Divinity in the world, of the unseen in the seen. In Orthodoxy the icon shows the drama of an

² Gilles Lipovetsky, Jean Serroy, *Ecranul global. Cultură, mass-media și cinema în epoca hipermodernă*, trad. Mihai Ungurean, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2008.

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autonomous and self-sufficient world, of a man separated from God, and fallen into passions and darkness. On the other hand, it confesses the eternal love of God-Trinity for man and world, the most manifested love in Christ, the incarnate Logos, and the uncreated and ever-lasting Light of the Kingdom.

In the 20th century the theology of the icon enjoyed remarkable attention in the context of the renewal of Orthodox theology, ecumenical dialogue and the rediscovery of the biblical and patristic sources. It generated the greatest attention in the context of the Russian theology from Diaspora, the theology of the icon being presented to the West as a theological-spiritual thesaurus in which the dogma-spirituality and cult of the Orthodox Church are expressed. In the thinking of theologians Vladimir Lossky, Leonid Uspensky and Paul Evdokimov, the theology of the icon is expressed with theological depth and accuracy, both Bulgakov's sophiological thinking and the aesthetics of religious art specific to modernity and developed under the unfriendly influences of the West being overcome. Georges Florovsky achieved a major influence on Leonid Uspensky's thinking. But the theology of the icon also enjoyed a substantial contribution in the Romanian Orthodox theology. Over three decades Father Dumitru Staniloae published some remarkable studies that brought essential clarifications regarding the icon theology. On the one hand, in the context of modern theology he uses the theological thinking of the iconodule Fathers, John of Damascus, Nicephorus the Confessor and Theodore the Studite, and on the other hand he put a distance between himself and Sergei Bulgakov's sophiologic vision regarding the theology of the icon. Moreover, with a specific creative force, he succeeds in expressing the importance of the Palamite theology in the theological and experimental understanding of the icon in the modern world. Father Dumitru Stăniloae selectively and creatively uses the ideas of the Russian theologians from the Diaspora, exploits the theological shades of the iconodule Fathers and expresses the dogmatical-experimental importance of the theology of the icon in the ecclesial and theological context. The neo-patristic synthesis of the icon theology represents an unfinished process, especially in the context of the current world marked by the challenge of the image and the hedonistic and egoistic implications of the verb *to emerge*. That is why the Orthodox icon can represent by itself, but also through the intellectual-spiritual theological hermeneutics around it, an alternative to the idolatry and polytheism of the present world, not only rendering the origin and the model of man, but also his meaning and purpose in this world.

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