

the passions, the hymns often tend to favor a Platonic dichotomy of body and soul. The biblical understanding of the flesh, however, takes a wider view and envisages a transfiguration of human nature as a whole: body and soul, material and spiritual.

These tendencies are not just a matter of the Hellenistic or Semitic cultural sensibility of the hymnographers, for

they deal with a central issue regarding our salvation. “What is not assumed is not saved,” goes the patristic adage. A correct vision of the body, also called to deification, should be fully expressed in the *lex orandi*, so it reaches the ears of the faithful. Such an expression must be clear enough to be understood readily during the celebration, nurturing in truth our relationship with the living God. ✱

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LIVING TRADITION

The Icon and the Body

Robert M. Arida

We confess and proclaim our salvation in word and images.

—*Kontakion, Sunday of Orthodoxy*

Iconography is one of the most important ways in which the body is affirmed and understood within a Christian context. This is because of iconography’s inseparable relationship with the incarnation. Both affirm unambiguously that the salvation, regeneration, transfiguration, and deification of everyone and everything depend upon God’s taking on human nature. This, of course, includes

God’s taking on a human body. Simply put, without the incarnation, and therefore without the body, the work of creation is incomplete and the divine economy becomes ineffectual. It is this Christological foundation—the reality of the pre-eternal Word and Son of God’s becoming a human being—that accelerates the development of icon theology over the two waves of iconoclasm that cover a period of almost one hundred years. The first wave begins in the eighth century and ends with the Council of Nicea in 787. The second

wave emerges towards the beginning of the ninth century with its official end coinciding with the first Sunday of Great Lent, on March 11, 843.

The icon is a fundamental component of liturgical worship. Its lines and colors complement the spoken and written word in proclaiming the incarnation within the celebration of the new covenant. Because the icon is a theological *word* or *statement* about the incarnation, it has a direct bearing on the positive and exalted understanding of the human body. This is especially the case given the icon's liturgical context, which serves as a lens through which to understand the human body and all of created existence. Given this, iconography stands in contrast to the Neoplatonic and consequently dualistic concepts that polarized and continue to polarize matter and spirit within Christianity.

Throughout the Old Testament, the human being is understood as a psychophysical being, without the trappings of an imprisoned soul found in Greek philosophy.¹ In Genesis 1:30, God acknowledges all that he has created to be "very good." As for the one created in his image and likeness, there is no polarity between body and soul. Neither is there, prior to the fall, any shame associated with the naked body nor any tension derived from the equal glory, honor, power, and authority inherent in male and female.²

The New Testament and particularly the gospels emphasize Christ's body as *flesh*. The prologue of John's Gospel states: "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" ("καὶ ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν," 1:14). In this passage the Evangelist does not use the term "body" (σῶμα) to describe

the incarnation. The word choice is important, since σῶμα can easily refer to a spiritualized body, unlike σὰρξ ("flesh"), which is unequivocally concrete and therefore tangible. Likewise, in Mark 15:45, Pilate grants Joseph of Arimathea not just a body but a *corpse* (πτῶμα), that is, a body that can be handled, removed from the cross, and buried. And in Luke 24:39, the resurrected Christ draws attention to his body of flesh and bones: "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me [ψηλαφήσατέ με] and see; for a spirit/ghost [πνεῦμα] does not have flesh and bones [σάρκα καὶ ὀστέα] as you see that I have."

¹ Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958), 157.

² Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 10:8; 15:5,13. For a discussion on female nakedness in the religious context of western Christianity, see Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).



Fig. 1. The crucifixion. Mosaic icon, Constantinople, late 13th c. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Jürgen Liepe. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

The Word's becoming flesh affirms not only the goodness and sanctity of the human body but that of the material creation in general. This affirmation is the basis for iconography, which provides a corrective to a dualistic understanding of creation. It too affirms that the divine economy—God's love and care for his creation—is worked out in and through matter. The words of Saint John of Damascus, a monk of Saint Sabas monastery in Palestine and defender of the icon during the first wave of iconoclasm, provide a concise and strong witness to this:

In former times, God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take his abode in matter to work out my salvation through matter.³

God the Word's taking on human nature and becoming flesh marks an end to the tension between created and uncreated. The termination of this polarity restores the harmony and interpenetration of the material and spiritual. The uncreated and the created, the immaterial and the material form a theanthropic union in the person of Jesus Christ. This union, perfected through the Lord's death, burial, and resurrection, provides a glimpse of history's fulfillment in the eschaton. For this reason, vegetation, animals, and even the stars and planets are included in icons. More especially, it is the union of the divine and human natures in the one divine person of the Logos that becomes the way of knowing the *flesh* as once again shameless

and beautiful, endowed with honor, glory, and power.

A striking characteristic of icons, regardless of subject, is their apparent lack of concern with imitating or capturing the details of nature. The icon does not attempt merely to mimic nature since it strives to draw together both history and eschatology. Those depicted are recognizable not only as historical persons but also as persons inhabiting the kingdom which is to come.

In this coming together of history and eschatology, the various subjects portrayed in icons—including Christ and his mother, apostles, prophets, bishops, angels, monastics, and married couples—assume various postures and degrees of movement, presented in *idealized* or *spiritualized* styles. To best appreciate these styles is to acknowledge their connection with the different expressions of the ascetic life. Unless the icon is understood as an expression of the ascetic life lived inside and outside of the cloister, it can easily be construed as an art form whose stylized figures symbolize and therefore function as transparent and intangible bodies. Easily derived from this conclusion is a type of "monophysitism" that deprives Christ of his humanity while supporting a Christian Platonism oriented toward his disembodiment and that of all human beings. This and similar conclusions have been and continue to be sustained by an exaggerated asceticism that ultimately ignores the incarnation and consequently the body as flesh.

Instead of understanding the icon as promoting a disembodied humanity, the defenders of the icon aimed to maintain the integrity of the divine and human natures in Christ. During

the second wave of iconoclasm, Saint Theodore the Studite, like Saint John of Damascus before him, grounded the icon in the incarnation. He draws much from the Council of Chalcedon (451) and its teaching that the two natures of Christ are “without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation.” With his needling, maze-like, and derisive style he sets up a dialogue with the iconoclasts, pressing them to state if they are undoing the hypostatic union and the integrity of two natures by mixing them and creating a *tertium quid*.

If Christ is comprised of a human and divine nature and if it is possible to say that he is from two natures and in two natures, then which of these natures makes him indescribable? Is it the divine nature that was assuming the human nature or the human nature that was assumed by the divine nature? . . . If you say it is because of the divine nature, then it is according to that which was assumed [the human nature] that enables him to be depicted. Or is it the reverse? But if [you say] that Christ cannot be described because of both natures, well then, how is this possible unless the two are made into one compounded nature having its own unique compounded attributes? If this indeed is the case, then this compounded nature is neither depictable nor undepictable. But being depicted and not depicted due to the joining of each half [that is, the divine and human natures] leaves neither of the natures retaining its integrity. And if this is the case, then is not Christ different from the Father and from us? We, on the one hand, are depictable because of our compound bodies. But, on the other hand, the



Fig. 2. Ss. Makarios and Onouphrios. Fresco in the cave church of St. Neophytos, Paphos, Cyprus, c. 12th century.

Father, because of his simple [un-compounded] nature, can never be described.⁴

For Theodore, the icon is based on the human nature of Christ, which is not compromised by its union with the divine. Christ is neither different nor separated from his divine Father, nor is he different or separated from created and *fleshly* humanity. Woven into this and other arguments of the iconophiles is the restoration and deification of human nature and the ascetic unveiling of its beauty manifested within the contours of the body.

The incarnation reveals the beauty of the human body. Here attention needs to be placed on the way nudity is depicted in the icon. Though not as prevalent as in Western imagery, the Orthodox icon does not shy away from nudity. Icons of Christ’s baptism often depict him naked. It is interesting to also note that some of the great monastic saints are shown with no or very little covering

³ John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1980), 23.

⁴ Theodore the Studite in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857–86), 99:477.

⁵ See Henry Maguire, *The Icons of Their Bodies: Saints and Their Images in Byzantium*, Princeton University Press (1996), 73.

Fig. 3. St. Mary of Egypt. Icon attributed to Nemeḥ al-Musawwir, Aleppo, late 17th c.

(fig. 1).⁵ The stylized nudity depicted in the icon is associated with the ascetic achievement of *apatheia* (dispassion). Through *apatheia* the body is freed from all that would use it as an instrument of temptation and all that would reduce it to a material object to be used and manipulated by another. The naked body points to a new Eden where Christ is “all in all” (Col. 3:11). Saint Symeon the New Theologian boldly describes this new reality in his hymn to his spiritual father, Symeon the Pious:

Saint Symeon Eulabes [the Pious], the Studite was not ashamed at the limbs of anyone, neither to see other men naked, nor to be seen naked, for he possessed the entire Christ and he himself was entirely Christ. And all his limbs and the limbs of every other person, every and each one were always in his eyes like Christ. And he remained immobile, innocent, and without passion.⁶

Even when the icon depicting a naked body exaggerates a person’s asceticism and attempts to dematerialize the body, the divine and human Christ remains present. This is especially the case with the icons of Saint Mary of Egypt. Based on the hagiography of Patriarch Sophronius, the materiality of her body is etherealized to the extent that later Byzantine poets describe it as a shadow having



the “fleshless quality of angels.”⁷ Nevertheless, it is her material, tangible body that possesses the quality of angels by transcending the limitations of created human nature.

The icon is a reflection of the great and high calling of the human person. Every icon is a reflection of the one who gazes upon it or who prays before it. Regardless of gender, it reveals the beautiful face of Jesus Christ, who, by taking on flesh, confirms the words of the Apocalypse: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5). ✽

⁶ Symeon the New Theologian, Hymn XV, *Sources Chrétiennes* 156 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969), 294, trans. in Maguire, *The Icons of Their Bodies*, 72–73.

⁷ John Apokaukos quoted in Maguire, *The Icons of Their Bodies*, 74.



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