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IMAGE AND MEANING:
CANONICITY IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX TRADITION

Abstract. The main problem with iconoclasm in the Christian tradition is the tension between the word and the image (visual or musical). What iconoclasts are ultimately trying to do, as it appears from the medieval and later tradition, is to save the strict verbal meaning from the "seduction" of excessive aesthetic and sensual imagery and sound. The phenomenon of canonicity in the Eastern Orthodox tradition seems to mediate between the two extreme positions: iconoclasm, on the one hand, and the unrestrained stream of imagery in Western religious art, on the other: by trying to control and regulate the exact meaning of images and religious music.

It is a well-known fact that the history of Christianity—both Eastern and Western—demonstrates an ambivalent attitude towards the use of art for religious purposes. On the one hand, art is viewed as a powerful instrument that, depending on the tradition, not only enhances our religious experience, but even approaches the status of a sacrament. On the other hand, it is viewed not only as distracting, but even as dangerous and heretical. A critical attitude towards an unregulated and free use of imagery in the West can be illustrated by the words from St. Bernard's *Apology*:

I don't even mention the immense height of the oratories, their immoderate length, and empty breadth, their polished surfaces and curious imagery. All these, when they attract the gaze of praying people, at the same time impede their affection . . . The beautiful form of some male or female Saint is shown, and the more colorful they are, the more saintly they are believed to be! . . . there is more admiration for beauty than the veneration of the sacred . . . What do you think is the purpose of this? Compunction of the penitents or the admiration of the spectators? O vanity of vanities, and just as insane as it is vain! . . . Moreover, in the cloisters, in front of the brothers occupied with reading, what place is there for this ridiculous monstrosity, some marvellous disfigured beauty, and beautiful deformity? . . . Such a great and admirable variety of various forms appears everywhere, that it is more pleasing to read marble [sculptures] than books, and spend the whole day marveling at these things, one by one, rather than meditating on the law of God. For God's sake! If you are not put to shame by this silliness, why aren't you troubled by the expenses? (Bernard: cols. 914-16, author's translation)

Bernard, although he is not strictly speaking an iconoclast, oscillates between a mild condemnation of venerating images for their visual qualities ("more beautiful" equals "more saintly") and a strong warning against the danger of aesthetic distraction from the religious feeling. One thing is clear from his words: his suspicious attitude toward any unregulated imagery in a place of worship and meditation.

While most of the studies on iconoclasm focus on visual images, similar attitudes develop in relation to Christian liturgical music: in the area that can be called "sound image" or "sound icon." Although there is no comparable "iconoclastic controversy" in the area of music, we see a similar ambivalent attitude to sound image. A good example of a suspicious attitude to the free development of liturgical music in the West is Aelred of Rievaulx, who writes in *The Mirror of Charity*:

[L]et us speak now of those who conceal the business of pleasure under the name of religion . . . Where, I ask, have all these organs and cymbals in the church come from, all [musical] tropes and figures having been abandoned? What is the purpose, I ask, of that frightening blowing of bellows, which produces this thunderous roar, rather than the sweetness of voice? And what is the purpose of that contraction and inflection of voice? One sings along [in a low voice], another sings a high-pitched note, and yet another modulates notes in the middle [range]. Now the voice is strained, now it breaks, now it tightens up, and now it is extended with more ample sound. At times?shameful to say! it is drawn into horse-like neighing. At times, putting aside masculine vigour, it goes higher into the graceful [range of] the feminine voice And this ridiculous frivolity is called religion! And where such things more frequently happen, there, it is proclaimed, God is served in a more honourable manner! So the common people, standing in wonder between these sounds of the bellows, noise from the cymbals, and the harmony of flutes, are [totally] shaken and astonished. However, they cannot perceive without laughter and grinning the playful gesticulation of the singers, and some whore-like modulations and changes of voices, so that you might think that they have come not to the oratory to pray, but to the theatre to see a show. (Aelred: cols. 571-72, author's translation)

It is clear that Aelred's concerns about music are similar to Bernard's concerns about imagery. The problem is not just the distraction created by aesthetic experience, but in general the departure from the established musical figures in the direction of musical innovations. Aelred's moderate position is well summarised by the following words:

But that which the holy Fathers have instituted, in order to incite the weak to the affection of piety, is usurped for the practice of illicit plea-

sure. For the sound is not to be preferred to the sense: but the sound can be often admitted, together with the sense, for the purpose of exciting greater affection. For this reason the sound must be of such quality—so moderate, and so grave—that it would not ravish the mind totally to delight in itself, but would leave the greater part [of it] to the sense. (Ibid.)¹

Thus, despite its ability to enhance our religious experience, “sound image” must be treated with caution because it can distort, or distract from, the meaning of words. The positions described in these Western examples can be called the “mild” or “moderate” form of iconoclasm in Christianity. It does not call for the elimination of visual or sound icons, but merely warns of the dangers of their unrestricted use. It is interesting that, despite the fact that Western Christianity mostly allowed for great freedom in the use of images² and music in liturgy, such “mild iconoclasm” is constantly present.³

The Eastern Christian (Orthodox) tradition, as is well known, took the issue of using images much more seriously, which, in extreme cases, even resulted in physical violence.⁴ No matter what the political and sectarian basis for iconoclasm was, Eastern theologians developed very elaborate logical, theological, and liturgical arguments defending the role of icons, which cannot be repeated here.⁵ The fact is that, since the affirmation of the role of images after the iconoclastic period, the actual development of icon painting in the East, unlike that of Western religious painting, was bound by strict canons of iconography. The “official” theological reason for strict canonicity was as follows. Since icons, just like Scripture, are part of Church tradition, their features must be preserved exactly. The truth of the tradition is in repetition, which is the way to provide the continuity of evidence. The canon is a method of preserving a particular way of painting icons and maintaining the unity of the tradition of icon painting by the Eastern Church. After the fall of the Byzantine Empire, the tradition of canonicity was strictly maintained by the Russian Orthodox

¹Viladesau addresses this issue in Chapter One.

²The *Libri Carolini* (790) and later the Frankfurt Council (794) and the Paris Council (825) determined the future position of the Western Church, which was neither to confirm iconoclasm nor to support the veneration of icons. Art could be used for the purpose of illustration, but it had no sacred function.

³In the area of visual imagery, the Reformation is one of the main examples of continuing iconoclastic trends. In the area of music, elaborate chants were criticised not only by Aelred of Rievaulx but also by Pope John XXII (1326-34).

⁴After the initial denunciation of iconoclasts and iconoclasm at the VIIth Ecumenical Council (Nicaea II) in 787, veneration of icons is finally restored in 843 under Em

⁵A brief history of iconoclasm can be found, e.g., in Besançon; Sandler.

Church. The importance of canonicity is clear from the fact that at least two important Church Councils were devoted to the question of iconographic canon. The "Council of 100 Chapters" in Moscow (1551) discussed various issues related to the canonicity of icons, including the use of manuals that preserve ancient traditional models and the question of exceptional spiritual and moral qualities of icon painters. The Great Moscow Council of 1666-67 was mainly concerned with the question of representing God the Father and the Holy Spirit in the iconography known as the "Fatherhood" or the "New Testament Trinity." The practice of representing God the Father was modelled on non-traditional Western iconographies, and the Council strictly forbade any representations of any other person of the Trinity apart from Christ.

As a result of such strict control, while the Western tradition encouraged individuality, interpretation, and invention in religious art, Eastern Orthodox iconography remained unchanged for hundreds and thousands of years. However, the curious fact is that, unlike Western paintings, the images the Eastern tradition was still trying to preserve are extremely unrealistic, distorted, and defy all laws of perspective or logic. It seems that, together with the continuity of evidence, it was important to preserve specific visual features, lines, curves, and proportions, that were supposed to contain specific meanings related to the represented persons.

According to the Eastern Orthodox theology of the icon, the icon is a visible means of providing a connection to its invisible prototype. The icon, as a sacred image, is nothing by itself, but acts as a "window" through which we can "see" the invisible. In fact, the icon is the only way we can "see" the divine. The iconostasis serves as a certain boundary between the visible and the invisible world. It is not a barrier, but suggests the presence of the unseen behind it and enables us to connect to that presence. This means that, while realistic paintings which use linear perspective are trying to imitate the way we see things, the icon is trying to represent a particular type of reality that goes beyond our immediate experience. If one attempts to represent this higher reality, it can be done only in a certain way: not realistically but through some sort of distorted code of images. The very absence of realism indicates that there is a special meaning behind particular lines and forms. One example of obvious distortion is an attempt to represent the ideal or "transfigured" state of the human body in the icon.⁶ The body of a saint that we observe in the icon is the human body after its resurrection in the world to come, the deified body. The

⁶This and other related issues are well covered in the following literature: Evdokimov; Florenskii; Quenot.

unusual distorted shapes of bodies and faces have specific meanings: for example, an extremely extended body with no attempt to recreate its three-dimensional nature indicates an extreme de-materialisation of the saint. It is clear that canonicity in the realm of visual imagery in the Eastern Christian tradition—which is taken very seriously—is a means of controlling specific visual features of images that are supposed to convey very specific meanings.

A similar tendency is observed in the Eastern Orthodox tradition in relation to liturgical chants. Church singing was seen as the earthly parallel to angelic or seraphic singing in heaven: a form of unity of earth and heaven during church services. For this reason liturgical chants were perceived as the “icons” of heavenly chants: a fact that further justifies the discussion of “sound image” together with visual image. Moreover, angelic singing is often depicted in icons, and liturgical chants are supposed to purify and lead us to God, just as pictorial icons serve as “windows” to the divine. It is because of the sacred function of “sound icons” that melodic formulae became part of the Eastern Orthodox tradition and were carefully transmitted as part of the musical canon. This canon served as the criterion of truth in the tradition of liturgical chants. From the beginning, strict regulations existed and their validity was not a matter of discussion.⁷

One of the main principles of Eastern liturgical chants was the unity of words and music. Melodic formulae were permanently welded to texts, one syllable was usually represented by one note, and the interference with the comprehensibility of the text was minimal. However, from the very beginning, very particular meanings and ideas were associated strictly with the musical, and not verbal, elements of the chants. For example, monophonic singing, which originated in the Greek tradition and remained the only way of singing in Russia until the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, represented the principle of the unity of the church, or a united will of all Christians (Lozovaya 1996a: 273). The slowly “soaring” linear monophonic chant, with its lack of a “gravity centre,” inspired a quiet, meditative feeling during church services. With not much repetition, it evoked the idea of a never-ending, eternal time.

The most celebrated variation of monody is the Znamenny chant that used the traditional system of eight tones (or modes). Each tone included not only a particular type of scale, but also specific melodic-rhythmic formulae that were strictly canonic. For this reason, a particular tone in chant-

⁷See Lozovaya 1996a: 271. This paper relies on this excellent study (as well as on private conversations with Dr. Lozovaya) for information on the Eastern tradition of liturgical music.

ing was as easily recognisable as the canonic iconography of an Orthodox icon (*ibid.*: 274). The older type of the Znamenny chant had no ornamentation, and displayed a perfect unity of word and chant. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Stolp variation of the Znamenny chant introduced a limited set of melodic ornamentation and formulae. The most interesting feature of these formulae is that the movement of the melody could correspond to the meaning of words, as their "sound icon," or even create some meanings of its own. The "quasi-rhetorical" figures in music could parallel such notions as the ascending or descending movement (for example, an ascent to God in the text), or their antithesis (*ibid.*: 283). Certain figures stood for particular emotional states, such as "exclamation" or "lament." Finally, certain melodic patterns represented clear logical or conceptual meanings that went beyond simple emotional reactions produced by music: for example, "cross," "path," "ladder," or "swing" (Lozovaya 1996b: 494-5).

Although there were no iconoclastic battles regarding the use of chants, severe disputes and conflicts broke out over the introduction of polyphony in Russia, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Indeed, polyphony sounded "Latin," that is, Roman Catholic, and therefore inspired by the devil. However, the most important criticism was that elaborate music obscured the meaning of the original formulae transmitted from the past and the many-voiced texture destroyed the idea of unity embedded in the monophonic chant. It becomes clear that the attempts to preserve the canonicity of liturgical chants, or the "iconography" of "sound icons," in the Eastern Orthodox tradition have the same goal: to retain specific meanings contained in the musical formulae and figures.

Thus a similar pattern emerged in the areas of both visual imagery and music. The efforts of the Eastern Orthodox Church, supported by some voices in the West, were aimed at keeping under control the traditional formal elements of the visual and auditory media used for liturgical or devotional purposes. The importance of this control over what appears to belong exclusively to the sphere of aesthetics and emotional response is supported by the claim that these formal elements are a repository of important meaning. Is this claim justified?

Regarding visual shapes, most recent studies of human sense perception in the areas of aesthetics, neurobiology, and brain research indicate that purely formal visual elements do have specific meanings prior to their conceptualisation (see Rentschler). What can be loosely defined as Gestalt theory shows that the recognition of certain simple patterns and their basic meaning is pre-wired in the brain. In practice this phenomenon is fre-

quently used by visual artists and the advertising industry to create a very specific impact on the audience. Recent research by J. Yates, involving the so-called split-brain patients, also demonstrates that the "split-brain individuals apparently directly perceive the meaning of the symbolic image rather than the image itself" (Yates: 9). When the bridge between the more analytic left hemisphere of the brain and the more intuitive right hemisphere is destroyed, images projected to the right hemisphere by means of a special technique are not conceptually recognised, but their basic meaning is perceived directly. While the patients cannot conceptually describe what they had seen, they can list other images with a similar basic meaning, which they do in a very consistent manner.

The difference between a conceptual meaning and a basic "immediate" meaning can be illustrated by a very insightful example in Thomas Aquinas, taken from a discussion of an unrelated topic: "Others act by some kind of judgement, but not a free one, such as irrational animals: for the sheep flees from the wolf by a kind of judgement, by which it considers it to be harmful to itself, but such a judgement is not a free one, but implanted by nature" (Thomas Aquinas: I, q. 59, a. 3, Resp). In other words, when a sheep sees the basic "wolf-shape," instead of conceptualising it as "wolf," it simply perceives the meaning "danger" and automatically flees. Humans also have this "direct" function that allows one to perceive the basic meaning of a shape before the analytic function tells you what it is conceptually. Thus it seems that in our brain images have certain basic "direct" meanings that do not necessarily "conceptually" correspond to the meaning of words, but rather parallel this meaning through a more basic "symbolic" association. This direct meaning is nevertheless very consistent. This model explains a well-known observation that poets or creative writers always involve visual imagery when writing, in order to create metaphoric or symbolic connections between words that seem to defy logic. It is clear now that this is done by delving into the realm of the "direct" meaning of images and establishing connections via this basic visual meaning that cannot be grasped conceptually "on the surface." Returning to the Eastern Orthodox icons, one could speculate that, since visual features in the icons have direct meanings, those features that were most successful in capturing this meaning were preserved by making them canonical.

The question of the meaning of pure musical form, or a "sound icon," is a much more complex one. The majority of recent studies do not go beyond recognising the emotional or psychological impact of music that is difficult or even impossible to define in conceptual terms. However, a

research project by Almayev is currently under way and seems to prove the opposite. Almayev's research combines Husserl's phenomenological approach with the experimental methods of applied psychology. His basic model is the existence of a demand and supply for psychic energy in the brain. The basic emotional response to a musical pattern, or its "meaning," depends on whether the supply is equal to demand, surpasses it, or is deficient.⁸ In his experimental study the subjects who shared a common language and belonged to the same culture (that is, had similar sensitivity to the meaning of words), but had different educational backgrounds regarding music, were asked to assign qualifying terms out of the list provided by experts to simple melodic-rhythmical patterns of instrumental music. The study showed that the agreement of the mean scores was most of the time significantly higher than the mean, which means that the subjects were essentially in agreement as to what sort of basic meaning was elicited by a particular piece (Almayev 2000).

These findings seem to agree with the observation that skilled musicians and composers always involve the conceptual side of their brain when perceiving or writing music. On the contrary, people who are not professionally trained in music lack this activity of the rational lobe: they only hear but do not "understand" music. Almayev's research also confirms the conviction among the practitioners of Eastern Orthodox liturgical music (that is not exclusively theirs, of course) that the movement of musical melody is not something purely emotional, but seems to have some logical or intellectual element to it that absolutely needs to be preserved by means of musical canons.⁹

In conclusion, it seems that both iconoclasm and the Eastern Christian tradition of strict pictorial and musical canons have grounds that are much deeper than either political sectarianism or theological dogmas. According to contemporary research, both visual imagery and musical patterns have a direct connection to certain basic meanings that they elicit. For this reason, purely visual or musical elements can, indeed, be considered either directly dangerous or directly beneficial to conceptual or dogmatic structures of meaning. Thus, both an openly suspicious or hostile attitude towards imagery and a desire to exercise control over it through canons are justi-

⁸The basic hypothesis regarding the meaning of music, based on Husserl's phenomenological tradition, is formulated in the following works: Almayev 2002a; idem 2002b.

⁹Indeed, even simple logical observations suggest that the movement of the pitch does seem to proceed in very precise motions, which have some "logical" or "conceptual" value: e.g., "up" or "down," "deviation and return," "expectation," "tension / straining," "repetition," as well as "two steps up," "three-and-a-half steps down," etc.

fied. In this respect, one can view Eastern Orthodox canonicity as a way of mediating between the positions of extreme iconoclasm and a free development of imagery and musical form. It is an attempt to keep in check the important basic meanings contained in the musical and pictorial formulae transmitted by the tradition.

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