

Saint John of Damascus:

The Byzantine Music Notation and the Theology of Holy Icons

Ο Άγιος Ιωάννης ο Δαμασκηνός: η βυζαντινή παρασημαντική και η θεολογία της εικόνας

Rev. Dr. Gabriel Mandrila

Theological Faculty, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

The antique philosophy consecrated the distinction between the *arts* (τέχνη) in generally – as methodological preoccupation with any object and subject of study or knowledge and *technique* – as manual specialization and training, as capacity and dexterousness in order to practice any profession (τεχνική). The Fathers of the Church of the first millennium showed their interest for the arts, as we understand them today as artistic manifestations, principally from the prospective of their incorporation/subsumption in the existential area of the Church, but they laid aside the specific artistic and technical questions which define the art in itself. The purpose of their idealist effort was situate in an intimate connection with the investigation of possibilities of adoption of every art in the field of the Church, in order to transform these arts in active agents which will provide the theological possibilities to express beyond every ambiguity the authentic ecclesiastical mind (*phronema*) and the authentic ecclesiastical ethos. The reason which was behind this ideological transformation had as central purpose the intention to contribute substantially and socially at the process of edification of common social, theological and mystical body of Christ. These two dimensions, the theological spiritual placement along with the hermeneutics of the Arts - on the first side, and the artistic act in itself along with the exercitation/practice of the Arts in the area of the Church, on the other side, are not identical/selfsame, but they constitute, at a noetic level, two different moments of the configuration of the contents and of the functionality of the Art in the Church. They have the same importance, but, from a theoretical point of view, the theological approach temporally precedes the practice and materialization following.

At the same time, in the field of the arts, apart from the dualism which is present here under the forms of theological hermeneutics and of artistic practice in itself, every individual artistic manifestation is subdivided in two more moments, which is represented by the specific theoretical norms and the practice application. These coordinates project in a way self-

evidently the complexity and the complexness of understanding of the ecclesiastical arts, not as an subjective effort, but as an hyper-individual artistic and creative endeavor, which, in order to be accomplished it is obliged to respect not only the special norms of every individual art, but, also, the theological framework, which impose one more group of specific theoretical norms.

This factuality is valid also in the case of Saint John of Damascus, who does not transmit in his works any information or reference about the practical or theoretical norms of the Art itself, but is preoccupied to complete the synthesis of theological and mystical theory of functionality of the arts in the ecclesiastical area. The aim of his works is to guarantee the universality and the validity of artistic manifestation of the human being, to rise at a maximal degree the importance of material element, to understanding the body as a the ethical *topos* par excellence, and to consolidate the theological underground, which might assure the coherence of a common course of artistic expression side by side with/along with the progress of the Church to deification. This fundamental theological instrument is the concept and the theology of the icon (*εικόν*).

It is generally known in the theological field that the understanding of the icon (including also the theology of *κατ' εικόνα*) holds a so important place in anthropology of the Eastern Orthodox Church so that it can constitute by itself the fundament of the orthodox anthropology. However, the meaning of the concept of the *icon* is much more extensive, and it is functionally present not only in the theology about the Trinity, about the creation of the universe, and generally, in the teaching about the salvation, but it is revealing his meaning specially as a central aesthetic concept, which can cover an entire ensemble of manners of expression and of artistic manifestation of human creation.

Saint John of Damascus analyzes exhaustively the significance of the present concept from all the points of view, and this is a unique and without correspondent case between the Fathers of Orthodox Church. So, barely the *katholic* importance of this concept is projected on a philosophic conception, which does not make difference between of meaning of *icon* and the meaning of *image*.¹

Analytically, Saint John traces down no less than six semantic levels (*διαφοραί*) where the concept of icon mediates from cognitive prospective in understanding of reality and simultaneously explains ontologically and facilitates in the pure spirit of the theology of the

¹ Almost in all European or modern languages is observed this scission between the *icon* (from Greek *εικόν*) as liturgical object and *image* (from Latin *imago*) as notion which describe the intellectual or interior life of soul.

Fathers the contact and the relation with the supreme form of existence: for Saint John the *eikon* is considered not only as an exegetical principle, but also as a descriptive concept, probably the most appropriate notion which has the interior power to project without ambiguity the rationality and the compatibility of the universe with God.

We could restraint these six levels at three degrees: the uncreated (the first level), the created (the second and third level) and the immanent (the 4th, 5th and 6th levels). In thought of Saint John of Damascus, everything is in a strict dependence with the concept of icon/image: every other concept will find exclusively in a strict relation with this concept his proper and profound meaning.

The Tradition of the Church transmitted along centuries two writings about the theory of *papadike*, which probably does not belong to Saint John, but these works developed not accidentally, but legitimately the same problematic which we have mentioned above. In spite of this, the texts, which circulated under the signature of Saint John, represents the same spirit as an extension of his personal contribution at the tentative of specification of the theological underground of the art of hymnography, interweaving the *melos* with the word, the said with the unsaid, the aesthetic with the hyper-aesthetic and the mystic dimensions of existence.²

This theological investigation of the area of these meanings imposed a semasiological reevaluation of noetic relation between *icon* and *symbol*, so in the end, after a complex argumentation, Saint John considers that the *icon* and not the *symbol* accepts a greatest degree of reality and representationality.

From this prospective the *parasemantike* follows, in accord with the theological norms of the theology of Saint John this special course, which implements the theoretical principles of the *icon* of *symbol* with a cognitive function, which, at the same time, guarantees the access to the sanctification of the human being.

The fourth to sixth kind of icon shapes the structure which gives the possibility, in a systematic way, to constitute an aesthetic orthodox theory, in relation with all the issue of Aesthetics and Art in general. Specially, the fourth type of icon contains a complexity not unproblematic for the philosophical investigation, in a reference with any kind of created

² In the present communication we will approach only the work named «τοῦ ὁσίου καὶ θεοφόρου πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἰωάννου τοῦ Δαμασκηνοῦ ἐρωταποκρίσεις τῆς παπαδικῆς τέχνης, περὶ σημαδιῶν καὶ φωνῶν καὶ τόνων καὶ πνευμάτων καὶ κρατημάτων καὶ παραλαγῶν καὶ ὅσα ἐν τῇ παπαδικῇ τέχνῃ διαλαμβάνουσιν» (edited by Gerda Wolfam and Christian Hannick, *Die Erotapokriseis des Pseudo-Johannes Damaskenos zum Kirchengesang*, in *Corpus Scriptorum de Musica*, Wien 1997).

icon.³ On the other side, the fifth type of icon, among many and different things, points on relation between time and eternity, with a direct reference to the liturgical *chronos*. The sixth and last type analyzes concretely the function of icons in actualization of the sacral anamnesis, originating a special kind of «θεωρίας αισθητής»,⁴ where the hymnography, as manifestation physical and spiritual, participates at the highest level of being in relation with a new and spiritual Incarnation of the Son of God in the Body of the Church. The transcendence can be touched through the senses, not by their denial, but in a pure noetic manner, and the icon is the central term for this process. Accordingly with Saint John, the structure of man is polysynthetic, but at the same time it is subordinate to a united principle.

In parallel, the conception of the author of the *Erotapokriseis* exposing the principle of this “rhythmical art (ῥυθμική τέχνη)”⁵ follows narrowly the anthropology teaching of Saint John, as we find it in his works, accentuating the theological dimension of aesthetic principles.

First of all, *Ερωταποκρίσεις* accentuates the importance and the role of the Holy Spirit: that is why the writer of the text prays Him to interfere through *ἐπιπνεύσεως* (5, p. 28) and *ἐπιπνοίας* (13, p. 28), *scil.* by inspiration, in the process of learning the «ρυθμικὴν ταύτην τέχνην» (14, p. 28), which is also called «παπαδική επιστήμη» (206, p. 44).

Besides “Saints Kosmas and divine John of Damascus made the melodies and the [musical] signs of the [musical] art for the glory of God and for *ἐκκλησιασμόν*”, which means that the purpose of ecclesiastical music and hymnography has as central axis the participation and the integration of people into the mystical Body of Christ, primarily in order to build in this way their ecclesiastical consciousness.

In the conception of Saint John of Damascus the musical skills and the use of music in the Church is based, as we already said, on anthropological hermeneutics. The “prosody of *melos*” is not a simple act, but supposed of three parts: «την του νοός μελουργία», which is the work of the Holy Spirit, «την του τόνου σημείωσιν», which is the work of the Son (*Logos*), and the «χειρονομία», which is the work of God the Father, in correspondence with

³ Generally, in a few words, the *icon* «may be a recollection of past events like a pictorial book or record. It may be a type foreshadowing something else. It may be an analogy. It may be by imitation (...). It may be a plan of a future undertaking, like the foreknowledge in the mind of God. It may be the image by nature, as contrasted with by arrangement and imitation» (Leslie Barbard, „The Theology of Images” in Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin [eds.], *Iconoclasm*. Papers given at the Ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, Centre for Byzantine Studies University of Birmingham, Birmingham 1975, p. 11).

⁴ *Imag.* III, 23,12, Kottler III, p. 130.

⁵ *Die Erotapokriseis...*, 14, p. 28.

psychosomata synthesis of man: «ο νοῦς γεννᾶ, θώραξ ἐκπέμπει, χεὶρ δὲ σημειοῦται καὶ [ο χορὸς] ἀκολουθεῖ».

In a sense, mankind seems to be simple (*ἀπλοῦς φαινόμενος*), made by body and soul.⁶ But, at the same time, he sees the man triadologically, not into a platonic conception, but following the scheme «τὸ γεννᾶν τὸν νοῦν λόγον καὶ προβάλλειν πνεῦμα».⁷ So, as the musical *pneumata*, cannot subsist without *tonoi*, in the same way neither the *tonoi* can move by their individual action without *pneumata*. Thereby Saint John understands the couple *τόνος/πνεῦμα* as he understands theologically the dyad *σῶμα/ψυχή*. Because, from his point of view, everything is dual: “the communion, the prayer, the psalmody, everything is *double*, somatic and spiritual”.⁸

The theology of holy icons extends his significations beyond the meanings of liturgical object named *eikon*, being united with the writing and *parasemantike* as a musical alphabet from the prospective of his mnemotechnic character. The doctrine of icons sustains the symbolical functionality of writing and provides the intellectual possibility to use these principles in the area of music. This is about a unique case of using the unifying principle of the icon in the art of music, which is very different from the western approach of philosophy and theology of ecclesiastical music.

So, the *parasemantike* reveals a different kind of relation between man and things, which is based on the symbolical decipherment of musical signs, transgressing the materiality of the physical world. The *parasemantike* is unequivocally marked by the theology of holy icons and just someone with the theological height of Saint John of Damascus could provide the necessary philosophical and theological principles in order to definitize this system of musical writing in the same manner. Only somebody like Saint John could be taken as an inspirator and a patron of this kind of musical system of writing.

⁶ *Dialectica*, 65,88-89, Kotter I, p. 135.

⁷ *De duabus in Christo voluntatis*, 30,2-11, Kotter IV, pp. 215-216.

⁸ *Imag.* III,12,5-35, Kotter III, p. 123-124.