



## Icons: Interplay of Artistic, Religious, and Metaphysical Profiles

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**Abstract:** This is a phenomenological analysis of icon as a work of art. Various approaches in understanding icons—magical, theological, artistic, educational, political, hermeneutical, phenomenological, and existential—are briefly discussed to introduce Marie-José Mondzain's perspective in her book *Image, Icon, Economy*. Having explicated her major categories such as *oikonomia*, visual image vs. divine logos, gazing vs. contemplation, the author suggests this phenomenological interpretation of icon can be further developed in two directions: an exploration of stylistics in iconography and an examination of the iconographer's artistic mentality. Particular artistic tools make it possible for a contemplating viewer to experience the divinity as "seeing the unseen." The iconographer's vision articulated in Jaspers' existential terms of borderline situation, transcendence, and the cipher allows qualifying the experience of seeing an icon as a "double transcendental participation", in which two transcendences—icon's creator and icon's viewer—become interwoven.

**Keywords:** Mondzain, Marie-José; icon; iconic imaging, phenomenology of; *oikonomia*; iconic art; iconographer; artistic mentality; Jaspers, Karl; psychopathology of the artistic psyche.

Ever since icon painting has established itself as a form of religious art it has been causing all kinds of controversies. At times icons, the venerated religious objects in Christianity, a religion which prohibits worshipping any carnal image of god, were claimed by many theologians to be banned as idols. Artists insisted that icons constitute a special symbolic language to express essentially silent and invisible experience of faith. Educators treated icons as any other teacher's aids, tools to help believers to comprehend the multi-layered conceptual paradigm of the monotheistic religious doctrine and to illustrate the Bible's narratives for students. Art historians considered icons as works of art that should be qualified and taught as mere application of canonic patterns with no trace of authentic artistic creativity and spiritual freedom. Ideologues

and politicians demanded icons to be destroyed as powerful, but hostile political posters that undermine both ideology and power, theistic and atheistic alike. Aestheticians valued icons as the unique art works which belong to the museums. Such multiplicity of spiritual and cultural functions of icons cannot be easily ignored.

Rather than counterpoising various aspects of an icon—metaphysical and artistic, in particular—I view them as complementing each other in analyzing an icon primarily as a work of art. Because its unique artistic qualities allow its various aspects not only manifest themselves in concert, but make it possible for each of them present itself in the most powerful way. In other words, I claim and try to demonstrate that only as particular works of art, i.e. the artistic genre per se,

icons successfully play their religious, theological, metaphysical, educational, and political roles. And I am convinced that the phenomenological approach is the best in unfolding aesthetic characteristics of icons because it operates with the meanings rather than with conceptual distinctness, rigorous definitions, or strict doctrinal requirements; it deals with realities situated on the common grounds of intellectual and psychological states of mind which participate in the constitution of their meanings; and it balances between act-aspects as well as content-aspects in the experience of icon creation and veneration. A phenomenologist claims something not on the basis of what he knows about the subject matter, say, the name of the icon painter, which regional art school he belonged to, or the trinity principle in the Christian creed, but on what he immediately experiences – what he sees, hears, dreams, recollects, fantasizes, or transcends.

I am going to perform a phenomenological analysis of the meaning of icon as a piece of art in the context of theological and metaphysical problematic shaped by Marie-José Mondzain's book on *Image, Icon, Economy*.<sup>1</sup> I believe her theological analysis of iconic imaging is proto-phenomenological since it operates both with ontological aspects of icons implied in the Christian theological category of *oikonomia* (the logistics of incarnation) and their gnoseological aspects that are engaged in the concept of image. And yet, her analysis is still incomplete because having explicated the object pole of the whole phenomenon of icon, she treated only partially its subject pole. This essay provides a schematic draft for a full phenomenological analysis of icon. Karl Jaspers' analysis of Van Gogh's artistic mentality is helpful to clarify peculiar characteristics of an iconographer's artistic mentality, which is to be interpreted as articulation of the artist's Existenz, i.e. the entire scope of living experiences as they unfold in personal ways of dealing with multiplicity of ultimate questions. Here it is important to identify the type of consciousness that is engaged in constituting iconic visual images that are not generated by the usual senses such as vision, hearing, or touch. There is certainly no agreement as to what type of visual impression an artist must have to see the invisible. Likewise any translation or transformation of such invisible imagery into an

iconic work of art without making it look like physical objects or any kind of material presence at all remains uncharted water related to an artist's craft. The visual impressions of the artist's eye in the absence of external stimuli may suggest some form of religious experience that is not just metaphorical or psychopathological. Before we move closer to the phenomenological analysis of icons I will first scan some interpretations of icons' spiritual power to assess their advantages and disadvantages.

### Approaches for Understanding Icons

*Magical Interpretation of Icons.* The power of icons (curing sickness, protecting against evil, assisting in victory over invaders, perfecting hearts, illuminating minds, strengthening faith, etc.) proceeds from the very first icon which, according to the sixth century Byzantine legend, was not made by hand, but was a print of Christ face on a piece of fabric resulted from a direct touch. This image was "mechanical, through miraculous, impression of the original."<sup>2</sup> The spiritual power of icons is claimed by this interpretation to be originated from blessing that transfers Christ's presence into this veil. In this sense the power of icon is considered as similar to that of an idol.

*Orthodox Theological Interpretation.* The power of icons is enigmatic and proceeds from the divine plan for incarnation and salvation of humankind. God made himself visible in Christ and it is only logical that Christ visualizes himself on icons. As two Russian theologians Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky who built a theological foundation of iconography put it: "Divine dispensation is organically connected with the image."<sup>3</sup> All iconic images consist of administration and management for the sake of the good and just life for humans so that "what the words transmit through the

<sup>2</sup> See the story in Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 8 (1954), 83-150. In a nutshell, King Abgar V of Edessa was said to send the envoy to Christ with a request to heal him from his incurable disease. Christ was not able to come, but he wrote a letter to the King and gave his messenger a piece of linen onto which he pressed His face. How the very same story was interpreted by the Orthodox theologians I have explored in the next chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, Crestwood, NJ: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1982, p. 28. [Henceforth cited as MI]

<sup>1</sup> Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, Stanford, CA: University of Stanford Press, 2005. [Henceforth cited as IIE]

ear, the painting silently shows through the image" (MI 30). The Orthodox understanding of icon as a window into the heaven through which not only human look up into the eternal divine realities, but God himself and heavenly ghosts look down at humans and dispense their mercy, love, care, and guidance was based on the notion of reverse perspective developed by another Russian theologian, Pavel Florensky. In his writings he demonstrated that the visual aloofness typical of icons is not a result of an iconographer's naïve childish mentality and that "the transgressions against the laws of perspective are so persistent, frequent and systematic...that the thought involuntary arises...there is a special system for the representation and perception of reality as it is represented in icons."<sup>4</sup>

*Artistic Interpretation.* Visual presentation of religious realities, legendary and mythical inhabitants of the Bible, and events which they took part in as indicated in the sacred text are not material entities and cannot be seen as physical objects. They can be represented in a church only symbolically in a strictly canonic way (required special arrangement of icons, traditional pictorial narratives on the church walls, nimbus and naming of the saints, color code for the cloth) and articulated by means of a highly formalized artistic language which has rules for depicting any part of a body, cloths, folders, composition and use of perspective. There is no such thing as a free icon painting that can be viewed and contemplated. Traditional icons are to be combined of different symbolic elements and read through activating in mind reference for each symbol, i.e. in the way similar to Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. The same principle is implemented in iconography, i.e. an icon is literally written by means of an "application of separate common and easily recognizable visual elements."<sup>5</sup> These were ready-made cut-outs for eyes, arms, legs, heads, torso, etc., canonically established poses, and coded colors.

*Educational Interpretation.* It is based on the idea that icons have been introduced "in order to make a grasp of the teaching of the Church more accessible for the new converts" who needed "a more concrete and clear pictorial expression of the content of the Bible" (MI 29).

<sup>4</sup> See Pavel A. Florensky, "Reverse Perspective (1920)," in Pavel A. Florensky, *Beyond Vision, Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler, trans. Wendy Salmond, London: Reaktion Books, Ltd. 2002, p. 202.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Gassel, *Pravoslavnaya Ikona*, Moskva: ACT/Olymp 2008, p. 85, trans. by the author.

*Political Interpretation.* Byzantine rulers recognized the power of visual representation in making themselves popular and securing their authority among the population. They would strip images of saints from icons and replace them with their own ones to make sure that people would rather worship and glorify them instead. The power of icon itself was never denied by those state officials who were iconoclast; the application of this power was something they were not happy with. The earthly rulers, not heavenly ones, must be worshipped and glorified. They did not want to share power with any divine. The source of their authority was divine; that is why they insisted on the proper use of icons. A subject must take the emperor's image as divine instead Christ, or God, or any Church figures; the emperor is to be worshipped as god. Obviously it is not a form of theocracy because here we have not the rule by the priests, but using religious tools and status of the ruling elite as mechanisms of holding divine power on earth.

*Hermeneutical Interpretation.* A general theory of iconicity developed in Hermeneutic by Paul Ricoeur might yield some results for understanding the aesthetical value of religious icons. Pictorial activity unlike writing allows the depicted reality to become not less and fading in representation, but more complex and richer; reality "culminates" in picture because an artist focuses on the essential elements of visuality in order to pack 3D into 2D, to "squeeze" horizon in a frame, or to make long hands foreshorten for the sake of perspective. Reality might erode or fade in natural vision and, by contrast, it gets concentrated and "augmented" on canvas. Such statement as "Iconicity ... means the revelation of a real more real than ordinary reality"<sup>6</sup> opens the door to the understanding of visual art as capable of transformation of modes of reality and performance of all kinds of transcending, translation, transferring, and transfiguration of realities with different metrics. In other words, physical objects, states of mind and emotions, facts or events in history, abstractions and concepts, products of imagination belong to realities of different kinds, will be presented in visual art differently, and will have different ontological status. We will concentrate on religious experience; religious events have their own spatiality and temporality and icons as the religious art reflect their peculiarities. Being

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and The Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press 1976, p. 42.

spiritual, religious events do not need space to take place and iconographers reflect this creating images and situating them in non-extensional spatiality and non-time temporality and unfold their pictorial narratives in the space of zero-metrics or multi-metric.

*Phenomenological Interpretation.* I will follow the phenomenological approach in the analysis of icon as a work of art because I consider it the most suitable for my purpose. I proceed from the perspective of French phenomenology on visual art, which in fact is very close to that of hermeneutics. Art is what reveals the reality, what states the reality of nature, what opens up reality's key elements so that it can show itself for itself by itself. Art is a ready-made spontaneous phenomenon. A philosopher does not need to perform the epoche or bracketing the reality in order to get to its essential characteristics. A work of art incorporates the artist's vision or artist's voice and makes his creation a "saturated phenomenon" as Jean-Luc Marion coins it, or an "exposition of reality" in Jean-Luc Nancy's terms in which the outside and the inside of what is seen are given simultaneously. In this paper I am not going to deal with Marion's onto-theo-logical analysis of idols vs. icons because it goes beyond my task of phenomenological treatment of icon as a work of art. For his purposes he puts idols and icon very closely as "two modes of apprehension of the divine in visibility."<sup>7</sup> Whereas my approach to religious art, combining experience of viewing, artistic means, stylistics, and personality of an iconographer, is more inclined into the direction of treating it more as non-religious original visual art.

Icons are works of a particular artistic genre, which by unifying religious and artistic experience, makes their visuality disappear in the very act of their perception. One cannot understand icons only structurally through analyzing their expressive means. Icons' saturation is more intense than that of regular paintings because they articulate the essential visual elements of what is not seen. Reality which is unfolding in phenomena of icon is not physical, the one with the 3D objects. That is why a scholar must study both an artist mentality through studying constitutive elements of meaning in the icon as well as perception of viewers who contemplate, or pray to icons. I consider a believer's veneration of an icon as a particular case of viewing icons. And the process of

viewing depends on the elements of meaning of the icon, the elements that are generated and combined by an iconographer. Keeping in mind this serious gap between what is seen on the icon and what is perceived, I would like to evoke Jaspers distinction between what he calls ciphers for the abyss of human psyche.

*Existential Interpretation.* An artist's mentality and psyche as deciphering of his Existenz was pioneered by Jaspers in his analysis of Van Gogh's art. It is highly applicable for the analysis of an iconographer's mentality for two reasons. First, Jaspers advocates the significance of the so called abnormal psyche for artistic results recognized by people with normal psyche. Second, it is known fact that Van Gogh wanted to be a priest and paint Christ, saints, and angels, but decided not to because it would make him too excited. So he humbly has chosen to paint more simple objects. Here I claim that iconographer is not a simple canon scribe or applicator of the rules and standards required in creation of an icon. In fact, religious artists stand closer to the abyss of Existenz—both Karl Jaspers and Van Gogh realized this very early in their professional careers.

Where does Mondzain fit in this multiplicity of approaches in understanding icons? She is not a theologian, historian, or aesthete per se; those are aspects or hypostasis of her research and they all engaged in her study simultaneously. She is Byzantinist who translated an important text, the *Antirrhetics*, written between 818 and 820 CE by Nikephoros of Constantinople in defense of icons during the Iconoclastic crisis. She studied this particular text and historical period because she believes they are extremely important for the now-a-days narratives about the nature of image, iconicity, and pictorial representation in general. She claims that icons having been seriously threatened twice in the beginning of their existence have won in Byzantine not because emperors wanted to use them politically to reinforce and secure the power and not because priests wanted to use them rhetorically, doctrinally, and educationally, but because they contained a very profound understanding of how human mind creates abstract notions and operates with them. In other words, icons imply a proto-philosophy of image as a major tool of any human intellectual work. I would like to mention here that the German *Vorstellung* and the Russian представление for the English word "image" express better what Mondzain tries to put into the meaning of image on icons. They better reflect the reality and status of what image is about—something which does not exist in terms of physical reality, but

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 2012, p. 9.

taken as real to reflect the meaning and significance of its function for entire human spiritual activity. In other words, on a phenomenological scale Mondzain takes the task of explication of the subject pole of the phenomenon of icon, i.e. perception of visual images and interpreting them as invisible—or recognizing in visual images the invisible divine realities. She insists that icons have their own value, independent from both their religious and political use, and it can be extracted from them once they are understood metaphysically. In my opinion, Mondzain's project of analyzing icon primarily philosophically does not go far enough for two reasons. First, her treatment of icons expressive means such as lines and their rhythmical arrangements, composition, usage of space, perspective, color, tone, etc is limited; it claims that an iconographer uses space and perspective in a particular way, but it does not spell it out. After all, only art is capable of showing something without depicting it. Second, she is totally oblivious to the contribution of an iconographers' mind and personality. She talks about perception of an icon, comprehension of the meaning of its particular content, spiritual processes and intellectual operations that are engaged in viewer's mind, but never about an iconographer himself.

### Icon in Terms of *Oikonomia*

The most fundamental theological category which Marie-José Mondzain uses to interpret the meaning of icon is *oikonomia* or incarnation as the divine plan for humanity and technique of mediation between the eternal and finite in all kinds of human affairs. And the task of clarification of the meaning of icon is noble not only on its own ground and we challenge ourselves with it simply out of curiosity; it is related to the nature and ontological status of entities human mind operates with when humans are thinking. Mondzain decided to translate Nikephoros, a Byzantine author of the ninth century who defended icons against Iconoclasts, because for him "it is the very cause of thought itself that is sacred and if the icon is sacred it is because it founds the very possibility of thinking" (IIE 3). But, she continues, if our world is founded on visibility and we are convinced that whatever constitutes its essence is invisible, "it is proven essential to establish the system of thought that sets the visible and invisible in relation to each other" (IIE 3). In other words, the invisible, image, is somehow related to the visible, icon, and connection between these two can be found in the teaching of the

Church Fathers about *oikonomia*, i.e. administration of all incarnational affairs, "the art of God" to manage and save humankind—a set of tools, techniques, rules which make it possible for incarnation to happen, to proceed, to be implemented.

Obviously this term is very heavy-duty and covers not only ways and means to sustain order, good and just living, enjoyable existence, but refers to many spheres of human activity: material, domestic, political, spiritual, intellectual, etc. And these rules that channelize the divine plan for humankind prescribe how to speak the unspeakable, to see the unseen, to touch something with no surface. And icons too are important players in the divine *oikonomia*. In the context of iconoclastic battles Nikephoros makes a very important conclusion: whoever rejects icons rejects divine *oikonomia* and rejects Christ as manifestation of God, visibility of divinity and divine presence in the world. Icon functions like a mediator between the transcendental and historical, the image and the body, logos, and speech.

Theologically it was also very important to make sure that a human hand did not in fact make the very first icon. The legend shaped by the sixth century tells about one of the first Christian kings, Abgar V of Edessa, who had an incurable illness. He send the letter to Jesus asking him to come and help him, but received the answer that he personally could not come and was sending the veil on which Jesus' face was imprinted. He made the very first icon by himself by pressing a wet towel to his face. So the very first icon contained the image of Jesus *acheiropoietos*, not made by hand. And this was crucial in all readings of icons that followed; they have immediate presence of divine energy, the very first proto-image or prototype that was written in the *oikonomia*.

### Divine Logos versus Iconic Image

The further specifications of icon as an instrument of *oikonomia* are developed by Mondzain along the lines of comparison between icon and word in implementing the divine plan for humanity. She admits that there is a tension between the pictorial and the wordy, the tension which suggests complex interdependence between these two avenues of *oikonomia*. Truly, first God said let be the light, but the very next moment God saw that the light was good. The difference between "incarnation of speech and incarnation of image", i.e. the difference between "incarnational functions" of the words pronounced by God and pictures generated by

icon consists in what kind of referential fields each of them has. God's word corresponds to the real world with all its inhabitants; it is reality which is on the other end of the ontologically laden divine word *Logos*. Icon seems to have no reference similar to the divine word. It is not something real to which an iconic "picture" refers; in fact its referential field is populated with "objects" and "entities" which are absent rather than present, to say the least about their materiality. It is an image that corresponds to the icon's meaning. And image is the main instrument of human intellect. But if images had such a status, continues Mondzain, "the icon's defense was clearly no longer a simple defense of religion alone; rather it had become a broader plea concerning the conditions and modalities of thought itself and the future of that thought in culture that was preparing a royal place within it for the image" (IIE 76). And she concludes that in this way incarnation itself turns to be not only literally "in-corporation, but an in-imagination" (IIE 77). It embraces not only material world, but all other worlds – intellectual, spiritual, emotional – where humans heavily rely on usage of images.

Once Mondzain has established image as a referential field of icon she moves to analysis of the ontological predicates of image to differentiate its status from any other entities—objects of the real world, spiritual manifestations, symbolic denotations, and the other thing-like formations. Iconic image made according to its heavenly prototype in the divine mills of *oikonomia* does not really refer to it in the same way as any image refers to its referential object. Usual parameters of any non-icon expressive image—visual similarity, conventional signs, culturally adopted symbolic hints, etc. which we try to decipher, put together, and correlate with what we experience and what we are seeking a recognizable image of—will not work in iconic image. When we look at the icon its image is not moving closer to us, but away from us as if it is withdrawing or retreating. If one wants to apply the category of presence to iconic image it will be described as presencing the absent or the absence of what is ultimately present. "Christ is not in the icon, the icon is toward Christ (remember Kierkegaard, being-toward- death) who never stops withdrawing. And in this withdrawal, he confounds the gaze by making himself both eye and gaze" (IIE 88). In other words, by looking at us Christ on the icon is gazing and taking himself away from us and us from ourselves. Thus icon is not a factor or step in incarnation; it is "mimesis of the incarnation itself" (IIE 89). At this point we have

touched a very important characteristic of iconic image which deserves a separate analysis. But before I begin explicating the meaning of gaze in iconic imaging I would like to make two observations.

First. It would be very interesting to compare distinctions between iconic images and word-generated images in Mondzain's analysis and those worked out by Russian philosophers and Orthodox theologians who have been thinking on the same issues long before this contemporary French phenomenologist. Two major figures in the spiritual movement name-worshipping, Pavel Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov, examined God's word *Logos* in its ontological capacity, i.e. as intrinsically endowed with reality, in the parallel way with human faculty of giving names to the objects of physical world as well as to intellectual and spiritual entities including God himself. Sergei Bulgakov has developed the doctrine of the divine humanity, which was a foundation for justification of his claim that man-made names of god have divine presence in them and therefore can be worshipped. But if God can be reached through chanting his names he can be reached through viewing the icons because both name or image are separate from their material carriers—the flash of a word and wood and paint of an icon.

Second. The other interesting perspectives shaped by Mondzain in analysis of iconic imaging are abstract art and photography. When she discusses the empty referential field of the iconic image she mentions Vasili Kandinsky's theory of non-figurative art. Abstract painting is not a result of content-deprivation of painting, but visual explication of what is inside figurative painting, but not seen. Abstract painting is thematization or articulation of inner formal mechanisms of any artwork and presentation them as visually autonomous. It evokes a viewer's special faculty of experiencing abstraction. In his notes on art he writes: "Turning figurative element of painting off requires from a viewer a capacity to experience a pure form."<sup>8</sup> Icon also requires from the viewer a special capacity of viewing and seeing images which are deeply rooted and unseen in our mind.

Photography is the art of making images. One can say that the very first photograph, a prototype of a photograph, i.e. an imprinted image of a person's 3D face on a 2D surface, was captured by Shroud of

<sup>8</sup> Vasily Kandinsky, *Tochka i liniya na ploskosti (Point and Line on the Plane)*, St. Petersburg: Azbuka-Attikus 2012, p. 57, trans. by the author.

Turin, a famous piece of cloth with the image of a man resembling suffering Christ on the cross. In the context of iconic imaging any authenticity issues, historical circumstances of manufacturing or forging it, or gradual acceptance of it as "the icon of man which invites up to contemplate Jesus of Nazareth" by the Catholic Church (by Pope Francis in 2013) are minor. The Shroud demonstrates the image which is not made by hand, i.e. a prototype encrypted in the divine *oikonomia*; it looked like a photographic negative which could be interpreted as negation of Christ's presence; but it was a result of the Resurrection and in this sense it is charged positively in the scale of *oikonomia*. The image of a dead body turns out to be a symbol of eternal life. Exactly the same dynamics as we observed in icon which is not perceived in the way it is seen. Now let's turn back to gazing.

### Icons Gaze – Humans Contemplate

To appreciate the specifics of perception of icons as a piece of art it is helpful to compare it with other genres of visual art to understand the processes which takes place when a viewer looks at the icon and the icon responds in a certain way. By looking at a realistic painting a viewer can see it as a result of mimesis of nature or any other objective disposition used as a prime source of information about depicted objects in nature, persons, or events. But when looking at an abstract painting or impressionist painting the viewer's mind works in a different way. The abstract or impressionist painting evokes his memories, associations, and recollections so that the source of information shifts from the painting itself to viewer's mind which starts to be his major content feeder. Eric Kandel has coined very good terms to reflect this distinction—in case of realistic art, the Dutch painters, for example, a viewer is experiencing "external participation"; in the second case, for example Vienna painters at the turn of the twentieth century, a viewer is experiencing "internal participation."<sup>9</sup> What happens in case of icons? This shift to the inside a viewer's mind is even more radical. In realist painting the source of information is outside of a person displaced on the picture; in abstract or conceptual art the source of information is inside viewer's mind. In icon the source of information is neither outside nor

inside the viewer. Iconic image has no reference, i.e. it retrieves not what it is depicted. On the other hand, a viewer experiences emotional and mental states as if he is not the one who bears them, but as if they carry him. He loses his Self as one who experiences something. And it can happen not only in religious experiences—a person in love or as obsessed with an idea of something, or as diminished a tiny ant whom the elements are in total control with. In other words, icon has a capacity to transcend both its picture and its viewer's mind. Contemplating an icon, a viewer might undergo what I call "transcendental participation" which is a result of a "double transcendence" which was described above and which carries a viewer into the sphere of the pure meaning populated with prototypes, divine images, celestial dwellers, conceptual entities, and so on.<sup>10</sup>

Viewing icons as pieces of art can take many forms and they are not necessarily religious. Looking at, addressing, gazing, adoration, veneration, gratification, lamentation, contemplation, even praying and worshiping can take place not only outside of a formal confession, but outside religious mind-setting and outside any religiosity what so ever. But in all these psychological dispositions the object (or subject, it does not matter now) of mental focus is aloof, vanishing and hiding its traces while it is moving away from viewers. It looks at you, watches you, takes your hand and pulls you away as is saying: what you see is not really what this is about. But at the same time it is not the look of a wizard who tries to provoke you as if hinting: if you follow me and I will reveal it to you.

As we have already established, icons have no positive reference field. Mondzain remarks: "The presence of iconic gaze cannot be described as a real presence... it is a presence of absence that bears all the weight of authority" (*IIE* 91). So, gazing of the iconic image allows detach and attach simultaneously; detach any visible finite, material, and real references and attach the invisible. "The icon was willing to wager that a man-made image would be able to renounce the representation of reality and attract instead the gaze of truth" (*IIE* 90). And only in religious experience "the gazing of truth" becomes personalized, it becomes God's gaze at the contemplator himself and touches on

<sup>9</sup> Eric R. Kandel, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain*, New York: Random House 2012, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> I realize that such heavy-duty metaphysical concepts as transcendence, transcending, the transcendent need more clarification and I will address the context in which they play the role in generation of the artistic message of an icon later in the essay.

his materiality making it transformed.

This passage in Mondzain sounds like Pavel Florensky's *The Reversed Perspective* where he discusses the viewer's shift of mind which occurs while experiencing icon's impact: not a person contemplates the icon, but the icon contemplates the person. The effect of the reversed perspective is such that figures placed in the back, far away from the icon's front, are larger than those in the front. In regular perspective the figures and objects on the back are smaller than those in front. But Mondzain makes another step which Florensky does not and which reveals her unique way of thinking: the icon can transform a person contemplating it; once God's gaze is engaged "the icon can act... it is an effective instrument and not the object of passive fascination" (IIE 90). That is why "the contemplative gaze produces the truth of the icon, the truth as existential relation" (IIE 91) between humans and God in the divine *oikonomia*. However, one always should remember that the presence of God in the icon's gaze is not the same as the presence of Christ in Eucharist. The icon is empty of its carnal and real presence... but it is full of its absence (IIE 94).

### Preliminary Summary

Many of the important theological problems related to *oikonomia* are discussed by Mondzain in length but are not included here intentionally, since this essay concentrates on a metaphysical aspect of icons articulated in their artistic space and the phenomenological theory of image which works in both religious and non-religious icon viewing and contemplation. Such issues as relationship between three hypostasis of God in Trinity, father-son relationship and its consequences for iconic image, kenosis, the distinction between the holy and sacred, differentiation between religious symbols and icons on the basis of non-consubstantiality, conceptual battles between the Iconophiles and Iconoclasts over the meaning, status, and value of icon and many other theological problems will need to be addressed elsewhere.

The phenomenological philosophy of iconicity and iconic imaging has been developed on the basis of primacy of vision and visual experience in human life over hearing, touch, smell, and tactile sensation. Most of the information humans receive about the outside world comes from their eyes. Visual metaphors are basic in all our experience including intellectual activity, thinking in particular. Religion recognizes it by making

visibility/visuality sacred and making God become visible in Christ. Philosophy considers visual art in general and religious visual art in particular as essential for formation of images (*Vorstellung*) in human mind, major tools of human intellect. These images first are visual, but eventually they retreat their object-like configuration and withdraw themselves as something material and concrete. What we face in the icon stage of image formation is the mere possibility of something, any kind of object-ness, any kind of certainty—a mere provision for any meaning, or speaking in Kantian language the conditions for possibility of formation of images which are not just "subjective creations" in human mind. Images have their ontological autonomy; they are not physical objects in the outside world, neither are they intellectual (spiritual or psychological) chimeras. They are transcendental entities, i.e. results of constant intrinsic transcending efforts of human mentality. The problem of a paramount importance which is raised by Mondzain's analysis of iconic imaging is whether images the human mind operates with are really picture-like. Determinates we can attribute them to describe their presence are uncertain. Philosophers are still struggling trying to answer the question whether we really see what we are dealing with as things, colorful distinct objects in 3D space, when we think, fantasize, recollect, etc. One of the answers suggests that we need 3D parameters and visual metaphors when we verbally explicate the content of our mind and communicate it in the oral or written form.

Mondzain's analysis is focused mostly on the object-pole of icon as phenomenon and only partially on its subject pole. She discusses some expressive means, iconic space or graphs, i.e. lines, on icons' surface which somehow lead to the presencing absence, but again treats them in rather metaphysical ways in the context of *oikonomia*, as tools which make it possible to see what is unseen; to conceal realities, refer to something which has no reference field, but not to displace them. A special aesthetic analysis of expressive means of icons as works of art is required to understand how this seeing-the-unseen mechanism really works, and it is the Russian artist Vasily Kandinsky, a founding father and theoretician of Abstractionism, who can be extremely helpful to taking on such a task.

Mondzain's work does not include the presence of a creator, an iconographer, an icon as an art-work. All traditional ways of talking about this issue are mostly concentrated on the artist's religious views, righteousness, spiritual purity, long fasting before

and during icon-painting and other observance requirements, often secluded way of life, etc. on one hand, and his devotion to tradition, loyalty to his teacher from whom he learned his craft, carrying this tradition with pride and care. Usually there is no word about his artisticity and artistry, his artistic mind-set and mind-states, his experience of color and line, his performance if he articulates his art as following the tradition, his individual manner of delivery of this art tradition. I can point to three Russian great iconographers Dionysius, Andrei Rublev, and Theophanes the Greek who are as different as Michelangelo, Rafael, and Leonardo. Here I am not calling for an aesthetic analysis per se – this is the task for art historians and cultural anthropologists. A phenomenologist would concentrate on the artist's basic mind-set and religiosity as well as artist's perception of colors and understanding of space. In other words, this will be the philosophical exploration of expressive means and artistic minds mentioned above.

### The Icon as a Work of Art

Having realized the importance of artistic instruments in delivering the content of an icon, Mondzain speaks about significance of space, lines and system of lines, graphs, and color. Her statement "The iconic graphs and its chromatic treatment is truly unprecedented philosophical invention because it makes the first appearance of a question concerning the life of image" (IIE 99) sounds very strong, but it remains a pronouncement because she does really explicate its content. Mondzain mixes up the common and terminological usage of concepts she operates with so that it is difficult to extract her ideas. Take for example the way she discusses the icon's lines. If "line is incision... that separates the plane in two... it is an edge where being begins... it can mark the visible limits of the void itself" (IIE 93), then why does it fail to contour a perimeter or limit for the being (object, thing, or entity) shown in the icon? Most likely it happens because she denies that any finite characteristics can be attributed to the infinite, limitations to what is unlimited, visibility to what is invisible. I believe it is exactly because icon is a work of art, i.e. an item which is loaded with meaning and significance in the "secondary sign system", not an event covered by means of the ordinary language, such endeavor is possible. Here I suggest a number of ways how to use the standard instruments historians of arts often use to determine the genre and manner of a particular work of art in the analysis of icons without

reducing them to non-religious art and losing their spiritual and aesthetic uniqueness.

### Space

We know that an artist does not really put objects in the space of canvas and uses space wisely ala an interior decorator who arranges furniture in a new living room; he must envision it, calculate it, set it up, perform it, and state it. He has to transform special characteristics of both the framed canvas space – from 2D into 3D to make it suitable for sizable objects, and the objects he intends to depict – from 3D into 2D to situate them on canvas. It is true about regular figurative fine art painting. Objects to be painted on icons are different; they are not 3D, they do not have any spatial dimensions since they exist not in space. So, we can suggest that they have zero-dimension, 0D or non-dimensionality and see if artists' tricks to squeeze 3D into 2D would work to adopt 0D into 2D. These tricks are not hard: perspective, shadowing, foreshortening, composition, horizon line. Pavel Florensky came up with the idea of the reversed perspective which is so clear on icons. The far-away objects and figures look larger than those in front – on a regular painting it is the opposite. He also noticed that instead of darkest parts of showdown iconographers used gold to mark the most concentrated presence of divinity – light. The rule of foreshortening for iconic figures' limbs do not apply because originally icons were faces on mummies whose painted limbs were neither totally flat not 3D, but looked like crossing lines of swaddling. Composition which plays the function of creating the depth on a canvas turns into classic flat three-folded projections in drafting. In 0D dwelling the far-away and close-by have no privileged positions in relation to infinity of steps in all possible directions – all is all and at once. Horizon line can be places in front of icon or symmetrically on the sides to reflect the fact that horizons could be everywhere in 0D.

Icons demonstrate clearly that there is no space as pre-given universal homogeneous receptacle for things, objects, animals, people and other beings; intensity of relation between them determines unique spatial metrics that could be different in different genres of visual art.

### Center

Many genres of painting are differentiated by situating the center on a canvas in a particular way. The most

common for any figurative painting is the so called golden rule cut which shifts the center to the left  $5/8$  down the side and about  $1/3$  bottom line away from it. It is a universal rule of harmony which one can find anywhere in nature from shells' design to tornado formations. Even hard-core surrealist artists like Salvador Dali and Magritte followed it. But in icons we have multi-centered space in which focal points can be situated at random or arranged in subordinate manner and determine ontological hierarchy of spheres of existence.

Also important to mention that inside the iconic space figures can be seen from many different points of view as if an iconographer combines various reference networks which overlap in the same space. A viewer might have a strange sensation similar to head spinning while looking at the icon.

### *Localization*

Relationships between objects of canvas which set up the space via perspective, shadowing, foreshortening, composition, and horizon line can be further detailed through the spatial characteristics themselves. For example in figurative painting it is very easy to differentiate people's right and left hands, the up and down of objects, closer and further away trees, back and front of the depicted figures. On icons they might be easily mixed up not by mistake, but out of non-importance. Because the figures are drawn as if they have been composed from the spare parts and in generalized objects, which the archetypical religious heroes and actors are, viewed from far away, from heaven, sacred heights, and thrones, details are hardly noticeable. That is why iconic figures often look weird and it is hard to say what is wrong with them when they have two lefts hands, or turned in one way, but moving in the other, or give the impression they are up in the air and suspended like puppet figurines. But being seemingly wrong, this affect serves the highest purpose of the icon—to perplex a spectator's vision, to create a certain unexplained anxiety, to question something obvious, to think in terms of life and death, and so on.

### *Color*

Color present a real challenge for a philosophizing theologian like Marie-José Mondzain because for her the icon's referential field is non-existence, but pointing to, suggesting, hinting, revealing through concealing

of something which has the most superior and the most authentic existence—the image as an operative tool in divine *oikonomia*. In other words, on the one hand, reflecting on how we can imagine and think about images themselves does not require them to be spacious and colorful. But on the other hand, since iconic images are colorful one can suggest that the images of the divine plan of incarnation and our mental images, being relatively autonomous and having their own life, might include color characteristics. So, the question remains unanswered by Mondzain because for her religious experience and reflection on it—both theological and philosophical—are inseparable.

The usage of color in fine art painting is different than in icon-painting. Though iconic figures are spatial and sizable, have some shadows, put in a certain perspective, icons themselves give a viewer impression that they are basically colored flat surfaces arranged in a certain way. Relationships between neighboring colors are very important and on how they affect each other depends their performance in icon as a whole. Usage of color was among the artistic elements that have been strictly determined by the canon. Iconic figures are easily recognizable because they are color-coded. For example, *Mother of God* was supposed to be painted in two colors: red and blue, testifying in her visual appearance to what she was as in God's plan for humanity, a figure who brings together the life on earth symbolized as red and life in heaven symbolized as blue. In general, the use of color in icon paintings is limited when compared to fine art paintings. Because icons are highly formalized, doctrinally coded, and culturally conditioned they can deliver a different out-of-this-world message provided a viewer approaches the icon contemplatively.

### *Light*

Light is extremely important expressive tool in painting; many genres are differentiate according to the light usage; perspective is set in relation to the source of light; composition is displaced with the help of light; texture is articulated only through the light; figures are related via light; dramatic effects, nuances, all kinds of subtleties, glazing, the final touch an artist puts in his painting, is made of a running light which unifies the whole painting.

Iconographers, on the other had, distribute light on icon's surface and use light differently. Iconic images themselves radiate light, are immersed into light, or

appear as made of light. They do have shadows, but they are not well-pronounced and very often they look like they are not logical, out of their proper place. Very often such places that are darkest in physical objects are the lightest on icons. Folders are often worked out with gold. It could be that all these peculiarities are connected with the highest mystery in Christianity, transfiguration, i.e., the appearance of the light which does not cast shadows. Figures, entities, objects, cloth must look different under such condition.

These are just some of possible avenues of exploration of artistic means engaged in iconography to add to Mondzain's phenomenological analysis of iconic imaging. We can now proceed to the final point I would like to make. The subject-pole of phenomenon of icon as a work of art is not complete without examination of the mentality of an iconographer.

### Artistic Mentality of an Iconographer

Jaspers' study of linking Van Gogh's mental condition with the painter's artistic mentality and manner gave me a hint to suggest that a similar connection can be found between an iconographer's mentality and the icon-painting. Of course we do not really have documents – notes, diaries, letters, medical records, testimonies of people who knew icon-makers personally – which we can use as data to build up an archetype of his personality profile. But we can do the same as Jaspers did with Van Gogh, i.e. reconstruct a possible model of iconographer's mentality based on the impressions we can get from their artwork. Of course one can object right away that such procedure worked in case of Van Gogh because he was totally idiosyncratic in his artistic manner, his personality did show itself in his crazy strokes, snake-like alive lines, exaggerated, crying out colors and he was as articulate in his art perception as in self-reflection. Yes, all that is true and yet such reconstruction seems tempting because it would yield clarification of those aspects in the constitution of iconic image which escaped from analysis of its ontological status and resulted in visibility of what is not visible or, as a contemporary Orthodox theologian John Panteleimon Manoussakis put it, as "moment of negativity which made itself apparent."<sup>11</sup>

An icon-maker cannot be just a carrier of tradition;

he does not implement automatically what he has learned from his teachers, and works strictly within the canon requirements. After all the tradition itself, canonic provisions, and secrets of artistic craft have to be developed and perfected. Living and breathing artists, not the guilds' members, do that.

Indeed visualization of eternity, omnipresence, infinity, absolute light which does not cast shadow, ghosts of body-void celestial inhabitants emanating the ever-present light, over-abundant mercy, and calculating terms of eternal life for humans in terms of time, etc. would require certain faculties of mind, psychological dispositions, and emotional sensitivities. A phenomenologist would consider religious faith as any other experience of consciousness no matter how complicated, tangled, multilayered, or reversed it might be. Very often religious people would say about themselves that something would carry them on, the spirit speaks through them, and they are just mediums of the higher power.

An icon painter seems to be capable of experiencing space as such without any objects in it or see objects and objects' presence without their size. An icon painter seems to experience space as spontaneous and pulsating event similar to Husserl's model of space used in description of the self-constituting flow of consciousness. That's why it would yield deeper understanding of icon-maker's artistic mentality if one compares his visualization of space with that of the fine artists who managed to depict space, i.e. to make real and active, without objects in it, like a contemporary Russian artist Vasily Sitnikov. In this case self-emanating space can be interpreted as eternal light and self-absorbing space as eternal darkness.

One can definitely see eternity present, not just feel or sense it in some other psychological experience, in Christ's look on Transfiguration mosaic panel in St. Catherine Monastery on Mount Sinai or Sophia fresco in Kiev Sophia Lavra. This is immediate visual presentation, it is staring, not gazing, it takes an observer in almost to the point of his annihilation.

Perception of color also will be special as being detached from physical object and experienced in the context of other contrasting or complementary colors. An artist uses not the object-related parameters to differentiate one color from another. Vasily Kandinsky claimed that an artist can easily detach color from what it belongs to – a thing, wall, dress, sky, etc., and express it via its relations, by positioning it among other colors and abstract shapes so that its essence becomes even

<sup>11</sup> John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics: A Theological Aesthetic*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2007, p. 57.

stronger articulated since in its presentation not only and not that much an eye is involved, but the mind. Obviously in artistic perception of color its different characteristics are thematized—its softness, loudness, density as well as its symbolic meaning in culture. Many artists would claim that they have a gift to feel space or color without any objects.<sup>12</sup>

These are just few example of how negative visuality can become positive visibility and we obtain it having looked closer into icons as works of art produced by icon-makers as artists who have peculiar perceptions of reality and means to express them through colors, lines, perspectives, and so on. Jaspers puts artistic and schizophrenic mentalities very closely and analyses them in a parallel way because "it appears that a metaphysical abyss opened up within them"<sup>13</sup> and they find themselves on the level which is "beyond the contrast of sane and insane" (SVG 129). Of course Jaspers was aware of dangers one could meet moving in this direction, but in his view "it could perhaps be that the greatest depth of metaphysical experience, the consciousness of the absolute, of horror and bliss comes to fore in the sensation of supernatural at the moment when the psyche has been torn from its foundation to such an extend that nothing remains but its ruins" (SVG 131). In other words, Jaspers thought of artists as of existential frontrunners who by nature are situated in the world existentially because as creators they have to deal with their own magma-like psychic states and as inventors they have constantly to transcend the world and culture as pre-existing and pre-giving condition and make it a-new or figure out its fresh configuration. In their mentality and experience artists are always situated at the limits of the possible meaning, i.e. in the borderline situation when a man must rediscover as new all necessary elements of human condition and, using art as a his tool, as a cipher of his experience of

freedom, must move to self-realization.

Iconographers are religious artists and they are burdened not only with typical artistic existential and transcending challenges, but with an extra-task of transformation of the ordinary everyday world into something extra-ordinary, ideal, perfect, celestial, supernatural reality. This is another kind of transcending which is an element of a unique religious experience in which the world discloses itself as a mystery. Thus, the total transcendence involved in making icons by a religious artist and their perception by a viewer as works of religious art in the act of contemplation has a threefold structure. It includes transcendence interwoven into artistic and religious experiences of an iconographer, as well as transcendence a viewer is supposed to exercise in the act of contemplation for enjoying an authentic aesthetic appreciation of an icon.

### Conclusion

The Iconoclast rejected icons as idols containing divine powers; the Iconophiles welcomed icons as windows through which the divine presence shows itself in the transcending experience of faith; Mondzain denied both the Iconoclast and Iconophiles as substantialists and icons as tools of positive visibility of the divine, and welcomed icons as proto-metaphysical tools which were capable of coining images (*Vorstellung*). In this essay I made an attempt to interpret icons as works of art, i.e. as devices for visualization of the divinity (with all its non-dimensional and non-physical qualities) provided they are understood as ciphers of icon-makers' Existenz to be deciphered by icon-viewer in the experience of contemplation. That could be a real event of existential communication, i.e. mutual self-recognition of two persons in the creative act of disclosing the beauty or perfection.

<sup>12</sup> See John Berger and John Christie, *I Sent You This Cadmium Red: A Correspondence Between John Berger and John Christie*, Barcelona: Actar, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Strindberg and Van Gogh: An Attempt of A Pathographic Analysis with Reference to Parallel Cases of Swedenborg and Hölderlin*, trans. Oskar Grunow and David Woloshin, Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press 1977, p. 127. [Henceforth cited as SVG]