

## Icons — holy images and their pedagogical relevance. An orthodox perspective

**Professor Dr Emmanuel P. Perselis**

School of Theology, University of Athens, Greece

Man is a symbol-making creature and through symbols he/she defines, interprets and sustains his/her life and existence. Through symbols man makes possible any communication whatsoever between his/her self, the others and the ultimate being(s). As a creator of symbols man has been expressing for centuries his/her feelings, emotions, thoughts and actions in such a way that all these expressions construct eventually, in space and time, a firm basis on which human civilization is rooted. Within this context, all religions of the world seem to use and exalt symbols in various ways in order to transmit and regenerate meaning(s) concerning human relations towards ourselves, the others and the ultimate being(s) and existence.

Christianity since its beginning has chosen, adopted and reinterpreted existing symbols, and at the same time created and used for its specific needs entirely new symbols. One of the preexisting symbols which was in common use as a secular symbol representing the power of the kings and emperors of the time but also the devotion and loyalty of their subjects to them, is the artifact in which the image of the king or the emperor was depicted, usually in a piece of wood. Having this prehistory, this kind of drawing image artifacts became firm symbols of Christianity, especially within the Byzantine boundaries of the Eastern Christendom, especially after the great historical controversy about the use and abuse of the so called «icons» in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the Christian tradition of the Byzantine era and beyond the icons served as vehicles of veneration and a visible mean of piety and devotion towards the person of Jesus Christ, the saints, the martyrs, etc. After all the images of these holy figures were artistically represented in a peculiar drawing manner and a colorful form and style. This peculiarity is conceived and understood as having a deep religious meaning that generates reverence and veneration and is projected to the icons, which are in turn sustained and treated as special objects of Christian theology, sacramental life and pious behavior.

As a matter of fact, the place of icons in the Orthodox tradition is closely linked and valued exactly in the same way the Holy Scriptures attain within the sacramental and devotional life of the believers. In this respect, the icons in the Orthodox Church function not only as written texts (books) for the illiterate (John of Damascus) but also as an emotional and educative resort that evokes feelings of strength and liberation. The icons, therefore, comfort and teach both literate and illiterate believers. As Anton C. Vrame puts it:

*«Icons provide the means by which the believer maintains visual contact with the embodied, incarnate, historical Jesus. They remind us that He is always in our midst and help us grasp opportunities for fellowship with Him. Matter has been sanctified by the Incarnation and, therefore, in an appropriate channel for contemplation, veneration, and worship»* (Anton C. Vrame, *The educating icon. Teaching wisdom and holiness in the Orthodox way*, Brookline, MA, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999, p. 53).

The educational implications of teaching the scope and use of the Orthodox icon in contemporary Religious Education is a good example for the promotion of a sincere dialogue not only between Christians of different denominations but also among adherents of other world religions. All categories of students of religions should be prepared to be engaged according to their developmental capacities in discussing the meaning of religious symbols and their implications for the lives of the believers to whom the symbols have a special meaning. This educational task, far from being easy, helps all people involved in the enterprise of Religious Education to better understand, respect and appreciate what others think and do with some symbols that have a special and a peculiar meaning only for those who belong to a certain religious tradition in which these symbols are in use. The icon, therefore, as primarily a symbol of Orthodox Christianity is worth presenting and evaluating in the light of its importance within this tradition to all pupils of Religious Education. In this respect, other similar or relevant symbols from other world religions could and should be explored in order pupils of Religious Education to become aware and evaluate by comparison the importance of these symbols and how people who belong to a certain religious tradition conceive of them.