

How do Religious Icons Read-and-Write?¹

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“The Orthodox argued that the icon painter, through prayer and proper preparation, can ‘write’ an image of Christ that communicates the presence of God; the Catholics believed that the priest does this by consecrating the bread and the wine. But for Calvin, Christ has taken his humanity with him to heaven and the Spirit now works, primarily, through the preached word – which is the reformed theological equivalent to the icon or the raising of the host” (Dyrness 2004:84).

Abstract

This contribution starts off with a broad understanding of icons and their communication, and the implications this has for religious discourse today. The focus then moves to icons within the Christian Orthodox traditions to indicate aspects of the interaction of text, image and presence. The final part returns to the implication of “seeing” icons for reading texts and hence for the possibility of again in our age encountering God in texts. Analysing the communicative dynamics of icons from the Reformed strand of Protestant Christianity, a tradition which exhibits a stronger inclination to biblical hermeneutics than to icons as operative faith impulses, combines these two interpretative traditions as a service to the unfolding post-secular intellectual and societal climate unfolding internationally.

Keywords: Icons; Bible; Interpretation

¹ This contribution is a further development of a presentation at the Society of Biblical Literature international conference, 3-7 July 2023, University of Pretoria.



By Lisel Joubert

Writing about icons and writing icons

In Philip Pullman's *The Subtle Knife* (1997), which is part of the *His Dark Materials* fantasy novel series, one of the characters – a scientist, Dr Malone – vehemently states:

“Everything about this is *embarrassing*,” she said. “D’you know how embarrassing it is to mention good and evil in a scientific laboratory? Have you any idea? One of the reasons I became a scientist was not to have to think about that kind of thing.”

Could the same be said about the subject matter here, because writing about icons as much as writing icons, both implicitly recognise a tradition of acceptance of the presence of God? This presence is, in the ancient and still operative Christian traditions of icons, not of just a vague divinity, but of the Triune God of Christianity being made concretely present in the icon and, hence, through matter (constituted by the materials used to write the icon). In our currently unfolding post-secular age (on which, cf. the summary in Lombaard 2022:330–343), the secular world and its academic heritage is confronted with the possibility that, in God, perhaps the complexity of good and evil has always been present, and that this presence influences how we read Scripture, view images, celebrate the sacraments, and more.

Many strands of Protestant reactions to the preceding mediaeval worldview fed into a post-Enlightenment understanding that could cognitively accept the possibility of the existence of God but could not as cogently dwell on the intimacy of the presence of this God. Hence, theological and Bible scholarship in the post-Enlightenment period tend to study experience and texts on experience in a detached kind of way. The technical

proficiencies required of Bible scholarship, for instance, can easily steer the exegete away from the discourse on such a divine presence. That kind of detachment cannot however be undertaken as readily in the presence of an icon.

Seeing is believing / Believing is seeing — the context of the communication of icons into our world

What is usually the case in scholarship, and quite naturally so (since our intellectual enterprise is Enlightenment-borne), is that formulations on “seeing” the divine concretely – as it were – in what is around us take reflexively as their point of departure that such religious experiences constitute the surprise. If related to “normal science” (in the Kuhnian 1962 paradigms construct), a moment of faith, spirituality or mysticism comprises the novel feature: that which is contrary to what is expected; that which elicits an intellectual kind of *Aha-Erlebnis* (Bühler 1907:14). This response is *as if* anew (cf. the clever title of Borg 1994) to the metaphysical sensed as *tangibly* present in our social, physical or ideational existence.

In such a kind of academic framework, something other than what the architects of the modern Western(ised) intellectual enterprise – whose practitioners Ricoeur (1970:32) famously called the “masters of suspicion”: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, amongst others – had (understandably) proclaimed, turns out after all to be possible. The divine is still sensed. Paradoxically, then, only from such an inherently modernist (confessionally – though unreliably so – faith-free; cf. Lombaard 2022:330–343) vantage point, formulations such as the following become possible:

1. “In the religious view of reality, all phenomena point towards that which transcends them” (Berger 1969:94–95);
2. “Change in the outward life always arises and originates from change in the inward life” (Devenish 2012:112);
3. “I imagine a picture of God via human images and metaphors. They give God a form I can understand” (Bruce Haddon, as interviewed, in Devenish 2012:118).

From a vantage point that is foundationally religious, untouched by the assumptions of secularism (which assumptions do not hold; cf. e.g. Vanhoutte 2020:1–9), the reflex is, wholly naturally, to the contrary:

- a. All phenomena are of themselves considered to point to, perhaps even to be inhabited by, certainly to have been created-and-sustained by God;
- b. The distinction between an outward and an inward life is the one that demands intellectual strain, and not the unity of these two “lives” (as we see pleaded for in e.g. the literature on “embodied religion” and “lived spirituality”);
- c. It is not images and metaphors that render God fathomable to us, but the inverse: the revelation of the divine is steered through images and other media.

The formulations in 1) to 3) above are by no means negative, but constitute attempts to express a faith-positive awareness or commitment in an ideologically hostile environment (with that secular reflex expressed, differently though not unrelatedly, within modernism and post-modernism). Formulations such as those numbered 1) to 3)

above may hence be characterised as metaphysical apologetics: expressions of a religious sense retained in a context that understands itself as free from faith. The latter orientation is in a milieu that is socio-politically widely and logically-rhetorically strongly presumed to be either the only acceptable or by far the most valid approach to matters religious. This faith-adverse reflex is inherent to the modernist frame of mind.

Based on the prevalent forms of secularism (on which, most famously, Taylor 2007), such formulations are of course fully cogent. However, the argument has been made that an alternative, mythological form of understanding (cf. e.g. Van Peursen 1987) does not equate to this modern, ancient-Greek based “logic”² (see for instance Naudé 2023, drawing on Blumenberg 1979). Something quite different is at work in constituting what is sensed as valid.

That, however, only goes half-way down the intended route here. By this kind of distinction it is usually implied that there are two “worlds” which comprise different manners of understanding: modern(ist) logic – which draws strongly on ancient Greek philosophy, and has historically via Islam fully shaped a millennium of the Judeo-Christian Western(ised) cultural stream of the modern era – and then the mythological or religious (or other broadly synonymous term) form of understanding, which dominates in most, perhaps all other civilisational streams. However, as has for some time been argued and in newer post-secular thought features ever more strongly (even becoming grist to the journalistic mill; cf. e.g. Gleiser 2023), what has above been called “modern(ist) logic” is enveloped by the more primary form of being. The non-secular (which begs for a better designation!), overarchingly religious frame of reference is the foundational way of understanding (secularism hence reflects its characteristics, not being that much different from any other religion.). It is to this *primary* religiously-realist sense / orientation / reflexive frame of reference that icons relate.

The latter realisation leads to this question: is it possible that this visually integral part of certain Christian traditions can invite us to rethink and reformulate set paradigms or classifications of religious experience in a word-heavy (academic) environment?

Icons in Orthodox thought and worship

To engage with icons, with Bible texts and text interpretation, with meaning and presence in the 21st century, requires at least a short background on the history and role of icons in the Christian tradition. The scope of this article does not lend itself to an in-depth discussion of these histories and roles, but will here, rather, modestly set the stage for some core questions regarding image and interpretation.

Belting (1994:1) is of the opinion that whenever images threatened to gain undue influence within the church, “theologians have sought to strip them of their power”. He argues that images have never been easy to control with words, because “like saints, they engaged deeper levels of experience and fulfilled desires other than the ones living church authorities were able to address” (Belting 1994:1); images lend themselves equally to be “displayed and venerated, and be desecrated and destroyed” (Belting 1994:1). Although icons had been part of Christianity, especially Eastern Christianity,

² I use the term “mythological” in the technical sense of deeply held identity-giving ideas and accounts, found in all societies and with all individuals; not the popular sense of the term, which equates to something akin to “nonsense” or “falsehood”.

from early times in church history, in-depth theological reflection on icons was only really triggered by the iconoclastic controversy amidst the growing influence of Islam, which prohibits such representations, and then the role of the emperors in determining theological thought in the 8th century.

The first period of iconoclasm was between 726 and 787 CE, with the second period between 814 and 842 CE. Both these events were constituted by a complex interaction of politics, Muslim-Christian relations, internal Christian theological debates and ostracising measures after the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE):

- During the first period of iconoclasm, Byzantine emperor Leo III and his son Constantine V wrote iconoclasm into the law of the Byzantine world (Milliner 2006:505; MacCulloch 2011). One of Leo's motivations was the belief that the growing power of Islam was a punishment from God because of Christian idolatry. According to this line of thinking, icons were graven images, which went against the commandments of God. The Muslim powers reflexively did not accept images, which led to self-examination in this regard amongst some Christian leaders. During this first period of iconoclasm, images were destroyed and supporters of icons (iconodules or iconolaters) were persecuted.
- During the Second Council of Nicea (787 CE), this policy was reversed, with Empress Irene setting forth icon veneration as orthodox practice (MacCulloch 2011). The same was done in 843 CE by Empress Theodora (MacCulloch 2011) after the second period of iconoclasm. In 843 at the Council of Constantinople, the feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy was therefore celebrated.

One of the outcomes of this iconoclastic debate, was a growing theological discourse on how to understand Christ, matter and presence. Theologians like John of Damascus (675–749) and Theodore of Studios (759–826) wrote extensively in defence of icons. In his First Apology, John writes (here from Dyness 2004:122):

I adore three persons: God the Father, God the Son made flesh, and God the Holy Spirit, one God. I do not adore the creation rather than the Creator, but I adore the one who became a creature, who was formed as I was, who clothed Himself in creation without weakening or departing from his divinity.

For John of Damascus, the core theological validation of icons hinges on the incarnation and, hence, of Jesus being the *eikon* (image) of the living God, as is read in Paul's letter to the Colossians: "He is the image (*eikon*) of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15). The Word became flesh; matter is hence filled with divine energy and grace. The material world can consequently convey the divine. Because icons embody the presence of the spiritual, they can lead to worship, *just as a text can*. It is for this reason that John of Damascus iconoclasm to Docetism, and wrote to his opponents (here from Pelikan 1977:122): "Perhaps you are sublime and able to transcend what is material. But since I am a human being and bear a body, I want to deal with holy things and behold them in a bodily manner". Belting (1994:7) thus deconstructs this sentiment of John of Damascus, reminding us of the complexity of ecclesiastical politics: "Once

God was visible as a human being, it was possible to make an image of him as well, and indeed to use the image as a theological weapon”.

Theodor of Studios, reasoning within the second stage of this debate (814–842), had to present an audience with different arguments than those employed by John of Damascus. The emphasis in this second stage was specifically on Christ, “and the battle would be won by whoever was able to secure the beachhead of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy” (Milliner 2006:508). The second iconoclastic controversy was not only a reaction to the Muslim presence and hence influence at the time, but also gave expression to the implications of Chalcedon; specifically its Christological formation, which brought divisions in the Christian communities of the East. *Viz.*, during the Council of Chalcedon it was formulated, over against Nestorius, that the two natures of Christ are united without confusion or change, and without division or separation, with the properties of both natures preserved. Constantine V’s argument was that, if Chalcedon formulated that Christ’s *hypostasis* (person) cannot be separated from his two natures, “then it is impossible to paint Christ without becoming either Monophysite... or Nestorian” (Milliner 2006:508). (Monophysite here has the sense that divine and human nature will be conflated; the Nestorian sense was, rather, that human nature will be separated from divine nature in the painting.)

Theodore of Studios identified an error in this reasoning, namely that the iconoclasts had wanted to preserve God’s transcendence by “refusing to ‘limit’ the infinite *via* the paint, brush and wood of a Christ icon” (Milliner 2006:509). Theodore, rather, maintained that a painting can contain an “impression” of Christ without appropriating his essential nature; thus, the icon “has no divine presence or energy in it, but only the hypostatical presence of the prototype” (Milliner 2006:509). God has hence circumscribed himself within the boundaries of a particular individual *hypostasis* (Milliner 2006:510). However, the icon shares only a partial identity with the prototype: “an identity of name and likeness, but not of nature” (Milliner 2006:510).

Evdokimov, an Orthodox theologian, holds the additional view that the 843 Council of Constantinople, which reestablished the veneration of icons and inaugurated the Feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, not only celebrated the orthodoxy of the icon but also set “the image itself as the icon of Orthodoxy” (Evdokimov 1990:163). Iconoclasts were accordingly condemned as holding to all heresies rolled into one, because it was seen as an attack on the reality of the incarnation itself (Evdokimov 1990:163). This was further taken as an attack against the sacredness of history, the realism of holiness and the “capacity to transfigure nature” (Evdokimov 1990:184). Icons were in this manner closely linked to the possibility of human transformation in Christ, and therefore for John of Damascus, to struggle against icons would be to struggle against the saints (Evdokimov 1990:184). This is because the incarnation is part of the journey of deification, as is recognised in the lives of saints as made present by the icons in liturgical and domestic areas.

The icon is therefore not just a sign that signifies (as may be attributed to the “Derridadaisms” associated with some post-modern analyses of meaning, according to Biernot & Lombaard 2018:1). In the theological understanding of the Orthodox icon, Evdokimov (1990) reminds modernity of the difference between sign and symbol. Here, a sign informs and teaches. “Its content is the most elementary and the emptiest of any presence”; it is never “epiphanic” (Evdokimov 1990:166). An icon, however, is not

merely a sign, but more, in that it makes that which is written, *present*. The holy is hence found *in* the here-and-now.

Image and sign in the Latin Church

Before these destructive controversies had broken out in the Byzantine world, the Latin part of the Church also reflected on image and sign. Augustine is one such example. Especially in the late Roman empire, where vestiges of statues and imprints of pagan culture were still visible in the architecture, theological thought on images had been essential. This reflection was, thus, part of a bigger theological discourse, which entailed more than a reflection on only idolatry, but was also about the *relationship between God and the world*, or, differently put, between God and matter. Augustine already recognised that all doctrine and teaching concerns things or signs: “a sign is a thing that causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes on the senses” (Dyrness 2004:19). For Augustine, God has made reality in such a way that things can become signs, and these signs “can reflect – and even lead us to – the God who is our true home” (Dyrness 2004:19). Idolatry, on the contrary, amounts to mistaking the sign for the divinity to which it points.

Pope Gregory the Great (540–604) was lenient in his approach to statues and symbols of pre-Christian cultures, proposing that symbols can be kept, but with their meaning altered to refer to something new, for example to a new Christological paradigm (Dyrness 2004:21). Gregory also assumed that the external object could become a means of stimulating the inward “vision” of God’s presence (Dyrness 2004:2021). Whereas for the late Roman people (according to Brown 1981:2–5), there was an unbridgeable gulf between this world and the spiritual upper world, the Christian martyr and the saint of early Christianity had redrawn that map. This world hence became open for the intervention of God’s merciful presence. It was, however, a mixture of Islamic theological influence and superstitious practices in society that had led the Council in Constantinople, in 754, then to decree that “the only admissible figure of the humanity of Christ is the bread and wine” (Dyrness 2004:2022).

In the Western Church, the so-called *Libri Carolini* followed on the Second Council of Nicea (787 CE), which gave preference to text above image. The text became the primary source of meaning, so that written statements would henceforth take precedence over images. In a parallel vein, the “interior” person was given precedence over the “exterior” person. It is, then, the interior person that is made in the image of God and was renewed in Christ. The exterior – which deals with sight, which would consequently be related to images – was understood to have been corrupted by the Fall, and therefore new life was now “only to be found in the incorruptible inner world” (Dyrness 2004:23). This did not, however, mean that mediaeval devotion in the West became fully devoid of images; on the contrary, it remained cluttered with images, to the extent that the Reformation world would be also a reaction to this world of image and devotion.

Reformation thought was, to be sure, inherently iconoclastic; Belting (1994:14) describes the Reformation as “this revolt of the theologians against images”. The Reformers wanted to be emancipated from old institutions, envisaging a church that consisted of preacher and congregation (Belting 1994:14). In the Western Reformation church, the institute that dispensed grace collapsed and the divine Word “was in theory made available to everyone by means of Bibles printed in the vernacular” (Belting

1994:15). Against such an authoritative text, the image lacked force. This can be interpreted as a growing dualism in which the unity of outer and inner experience, which guided people in Middle Ages, “was now broken down into dualism of spirit and matter, subject and the world” (Belting 1994:15). This can be seen also in the associated understanding of John Calvin.

Calvin’s Reformation project in Geneva was iconoclastic in its broadest sense. He proposed not only the removal of images, but also removal of the whole mediaeval system of worship. He wanted to reconstruct the church “after a new blueprint provided by Scripture” (Dyrness 2004:50). God had granted, graciously, a divine awareness in the human heart, in Calvin’s understanding, and this glory shines through every aspect of creation, but we are blind to this splendour. The human heart only reflects arrogance and pride. Calvin was of the opinion that sound investigation would, however, lead to true knowledge. He therefore wrote his *Institutes* to capture and illustrate the essential truth of Scripture, and to give it order. One can see that, in a sense, here the *text itself is taking on some iconic functions* that “were previously carried by the ceremonies, images and even the drama of worship” (Dyrness 2004:66). According to Calvin, we *see* the truth when *it is preached, not by looking at images*, with the latter *seeing* done in our minds. This truth is grasped by the faith of our hearts. Any other attempt to picture God or God’s truth would hence be unnecessary and even harmful (Dyrness 2004:76).

In the Reformation world, purity of doctrine was determined by the letter of the text, and religion thus became an ethical code of living; “God’s distance prohibits his presence” (Belting 1994:15). Icons would now inhabit the world of art (up to the present time; cf. e.g. Baldessari 2004) rather than the world of liturgy, prayer, transformation and experiencing God.

Any scholar of Reformation thought would, however, be cognisant of the complexity of this polemical way of theologising over against a specific Catholic understanding of the time, which meant that different perspectives on images were simultaneously present. Martin Luther, for example, was more receptive to role of images, not just in a pragmatic sense of understanding the role of images as presenting the gospel to the illiterate, but also within his theological understanding of the “masks of God”. For Luther “the whole of history is God’s great masquerade and God’s masks (*larvae Dei*) can take on many forms” (Cilliers 2010:40). What is happening in Reformed thought at present is perhaps a revisiting of the supposed core Reformed understanding of matter and image, because it is again recognised that the early Reformation formulations were in reaction to the Catholic theology and devotion of the time. This elicits a dialogue between early church theology and the reception of Reformed thought. In the South African context, John de Gruchy undertook this type of reappraisal in *Icons as a means of grace* (2008), introducing this form of Christian theology to 21st century Protestant readers — a century filled with images.

The reception of icons

The theology of the icon is a historically unfolding process, as we have seen, which crystallised only in the 10th to 15th centuries. During the same period, the Orthodox faith spread from its Byzantine context to new geographical eras, such as Russia. This process was of course not homogenic, and it is therefore important when considering icons in a broader sense to keep in mind the regional differences among Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia

and Russia (Evdokimov 1990:184). Between the times of the iconoclastic controversies of the Early Middle Ages and the modern-day post-Communist East, icons have thus been received heterogeneously in different cultures and contexts, including within the sphere of Orthodox traditions. In Communist and post-Communist Russia, for instance, there was a heightened reflection on this heritage in the theologies of Ouspensky (1978), Lossky (1999) and Evdikomov (1990), which deserve mention here, albeit too briefly.

With Lossky (1999:36), the sense is that “the icon is not a representation of the Deity, but an indication of the participation of a given person in Divine life”. On his part, Ouspensky (1978:476), in his *Theology of the Icon*, regards it as theologically unthinkable not to take icons seriously: “The entire life of the Church is based on a miracle, the miracle *par excellence* that gives meaning and structure to this life – the incarnation of God and man’s deification”. For him, therefore, icons relate to the mysteries of the divine economy and of the salvation of humanity.

Icons have also been revisited outside of purely theological thought, notably in the art world. The reflection on presence as a theological construct can indeed be enriched by perspectives from art history. Antonova (2010), for instance, explored the concept of “reverse perspective” present in icon writing. She defines it as the “simultaneous representation of different planes of the same image on the picture surface, regardless of whether the corresponding planes in the represented objects could be seen from a single viewpoint” (Antonova 2010:105). She does not regard this reverse perspective as standing in contrast to a linear perspective; rather, “[t]he icon often shows parts and surfaces which cannot be seen simultaneously” (Antonova 2010:107). These additional, supplementary or simultaneous surfaces are not left in the shadows, so to speak, but are painted in strikingly bright colours.

Antonova argues that this method portrays a specific understanding of time and presence. We as humans cannot see in that manner, but at the heart of a religious worldview lies the belief that what is impossible for a human is indeed possible for the omnipotent God; for her, in particular, “a timelessly eternal God, to whom all moments in time exist simultaneously, would see all points in space simultaneously” (Antonova 2010:107). Antonova (2010:108) accordingly argues that an icon is constructed in such a way that “it could appear to divine vision or rather, the nearest that an image can come to convey such a vision to our more limited sight”. This “reverse perspective” has been accepted “as an element of the form, authorized to carry the presence of the prototype in the image”; it is therefore “different from the Kantian object of disinterested aesthetic contemplation” (Antonova 2010:154).

Antonova’s insights recalls discussions in literary theory of the close readings of texts, or what in theological traditions is known as *Lectio Divina*, where the subject and object is differently interrogated: who is reading and who is being read? This echoes strongly the Reformation’s view of the foundational way in which believers find themselves understood in and by Scripture (cf. Rossouw 1963). In relation to icons, who, then, is seeing and who is seen? Is the image purely a passive object or does the object, as it were, stare back? In art, as in worship, icons transform the relationship between viewing subject and viewed object (Antonova 2010:154).

Luehrmann (2019) examines the role of imagination with icons as objects of veneration: the icon is not necessarily the vehicle that inspires imagination. The history of Orthodox thought and reaction to other forms of art shows that icons, similar to certain

theological traditions and Bible interpretations, themselves offer strict borders for what is theologically admissible and what not. The protocols on the production of icons (Luehrmann 2019:200) prevent them from being only, one-sidedly, a product of the individual artist's imagination. Luehrmann (2019:200) hence identifies twin dangers in the history of Christianity in Russia, of deifying matter and of deifying the imagination, with their varying emphases. Icons are, in this understanding, a means to curb such dangers of the imagination.

The irony, in view of the above, is that the text-centred Calvin and the image-centred Orthodox theology both saw imagination, or rather “unauthorized flights of fancy” (Luehrmann 2019:209), as a dangerous human occupation (Luehrmann 2019:208): “While outsiders may see iconography as the height of Orthodox imagination, for its contemporary creators and defenders these images are emphatically non-imaginary.” She further indicates that iconography “attempts to bind mental images to constraints of a similar strength as those that govern perception of the natural world, in order to save worshippers from idolatry of worshipping their own imagination or from being taken over by imaginaries produced by the media and by other religious denominations” (Luehrmann 2020:208). Icons become a visual canon, just as strict in setting boundaries for interpretation as any confessional document might be.

Icons and literature, or: presence and meaning

In scholarship that focuses on biblical *literature*, icons confront us with our scholarly verbs. In reflecting on the role of icons in the Christian tradition, certain verbs, often used in academic hermeneutical discussions, have to be turned around and looked at from another angle, if not replaced. Concepts of meaning-making and interpretation therefore come under scrutiny.

Traditionally, the use of icons in worship and theology has balanced two matters. They were seen, first, as visible theology. This is not the same as theological *meaning*, but rather relates to witnessing to core theological truths. However, second, in their public and private settings, icons were venerated, because – significantly – the *presence of the divine was experienced* in and through them. The icon as a window from God embraced a certain transcendence and immanence — concepts which scholars in the wake of the Enlightenment steered away from; also in their study of the Bible.

An icon, by contrast, confronts the one seeing with two possible verbs: does one *interpret* an icon or does one *experience* an icon? Is the icon solely a theological interpretation of a Bible text? Or is it also a visual presence-making of God in, behind and beyond the text? The *Theotokos* icon at the opening of this contribution, written by Lisel Joubert (2023; more broadly, cf. Nicholas 2020), illustrates this. To summarise all too briefly here the interpretative dynamism associated with that icon: it is not in the first instance what one makes of the parts (the postures, the clothing, the eyes, the hands, the holiness symbols and more) or the whole (the associations, the implications and more) of the icon that determines their meaning; rather, meaning is what these parts and the whole does to one.

Icons, as a result, elicit understanding anew the metaphorical character of all theological language. They can therefore lead us to read Bible texts as also unfixed constructs of meaning. When seeing the icon as a window that invites one deeper into the presence of God, such a form of communication becomes a place where we start to

reflect on the implications inherent to Bible-and-meaning, without us requiring a finalised formulation. Theological metaphors, like icons, are rooted in God's creative interaction with the world, known as the incarnation, and arise out of the human image-making faculty known as imagination. *Both icon and metaphor image God forth into this world.* God is the image-maker; our imagination is rooted in God's creative nature (Need 2007:101).

As a counterpart to experiencing the Bible text as also icon, Lepakhin (2006:20) recognises both verbal and visual icons in Byzantine theology. Both verbal and visual icons had to fulfil three main characteristics. First, a verbal and visual icon must have as its aim "the depiction of prototypes, or archetype of things, events and phenomena, and not these things, events and phenomena in their phenomenological or empirical form" (Lepakhin 2006:20). Second, the verbal icon must observe certain compositional and structural attributes; it must be "*constructed* as a form of The Prototype and so it should be a verbal equivalent of the visual icon" (Lepakhin 2006:20). Third, the verbal icon is directed towards a particular visual icon (Lepakhin 2006:20).

Lepakhin (2006:21–29) goes on to specify four types of correlation between a verbal text and a visual text:

- *Transpositio* – a picture comes into being because of a literary theme. Icon painting takes its subject from a text; however, "icon painting may only be directed towards the sacred text which serves as a verbal icon" (Lepakhin 2006:21). It is not possible to conceive of an image for an icon without a well-known sacred text.
- *Transfiguratio* – the semantics of the text is transfigured into the semantics of the image. This relates to how "sense and meaning [can] be 'translated' from one artistic language to another" (Lepakhin 2006:22). The icon conveys little of the history of event, but rather bears the "inner Christian meaning of the event" (Lepakhin 2006:22). Earthly events hence convey the heavenly; time becomes eternity. The icon brings about the transfiguration of the Gospel text. The icon avoids consecutive narration, changes location of events, misses certain things and combines certain events in a whole (Lepakhin 2006:22). The reverse perspective (cf. Antonova 2010) also plays a role in this.
- *Projectio* – the transfer of the conceptual model by the text to the image. Icon painting expresses the teachings of the church and its worldview (Lepakhin 2006:22). Icon painting requires permission; there is no free or optional connection between text and icon. It is a "*necessary and mutual link*" (Lepakhin 2006:24). When the icon is painted in accordance with the canon of the icon, the semantics of the event is transferred into icon and is therefore understood by not only the educated.
- *Impositio* – inclusion into text of an icon (Lepakhin 2006:29).

The above highlights an assumption of those that integrate icons into their lives: this is not *any text* or *any image*. The boundaries of what an icon is enable meaning. Is this, however, a valid assumption in a hermeneutical process?

Concluding questions for heuristic purposes

A range of questions present themselves from the arguments above. Providing answers to these outlined issues requires an expanding corpus of investigations by an array of researchers, *en route* to gaining greater clarity on these matters. However, rather than assume these questions, they ought to be stated, though in an inviting way, as we try to do here in our conclusion of the non-conclusive sort; that is, so as to invite such further reflection.

Such questions include: do we know what to *do* with icons? Do they have any *use* in exegetical or scholarly explorations? Are we uneasy (embarrassed) about the questions of the divine, about the world and about a way of being human that icons present? Is any religious discourse deemed valid today, in an epistemological manner, or is this just a phenomenon to be studied in the social sciences?

Just the possibility that icons refer to divine presence or to the Other made icons dangerous in 20th century Communist Russia. From the perspective of their officially atheist political ideology, the work of the iconographer becomes not only useless but also harmful to society (Ouspensky 1992:465). Icons have in truth, however, never been a-political, as seen in the iconoclastic controversies, in Communism and again in the current powerplay between Orthodox groups in Ukraine and Russia during the present war. These controversies play out much the same as with Scripture and the interpretation of Scripture, being loaded with meaning in ecclesiastical debates and with the possibilities of ostracising.

John of Damascus was adamant that through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God has redeemed matter; matter therefore cannot be shunned (Milliner 2006:506). Ought we not in our post-everything world of utilitarianism, ecological crisis and the loss of a sense of sacrality, to rethink our understanding of *matter*? — That objects in certain settings (or outside them) speak to us from beyond. Is what we see not the end, but only the beginning?

Furthermore: do icons as images give God a form I can understand? Do they lead us away from form and understanding to awareness? In what sense, then, does such an awareness play a role in reading texts not as just objects of dissection, but as words that make present that which is beyond words?

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