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Оригинални научни рад

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## Origen and Liturgical symbolism: The teaching of the Great Alexandrian Theologian on Church art

**Abstract:** The present paper aims to examine the relation between Liturgy as a service which is imbued with symbolism (and all kinds of art) and one typically spiritual view of communion with God. How could we reconcile Christian spirituality and liturgical symbolism? What is the view of Origen about liturgical symbolism? There are some opinions in academic research connecting Origen with iconoclastic beliefs in the Church. According to these opinions, Origen's concept of absolutely incorporeal God and the irreconcilable relation between spiritual and physical substances had influence on the repudiation of icons in Church in later times. In general, Origen's concept of God, human being and salvation formed one specific context for the theological understanding of human salvation and communion with God. With regard to this presumption, we will try to analyze it through the following steps. At first, we try to define the concept of body and material reality in Origen's ontology, as well as to contrast it to soul and spirit, which are largely emphasized in all his exegetical and other reflections. The second step is to try to reconstruct insights of Origen about symbols and icons in Liturgy. There is no complete exposition on this topic in his writings, but implicitly there is a possibility to investigate his teaching about icon and symbols. Here we take into consideration the idea of Christ as the icon of the invisible Father. Further, Origen mentions the concept of icon when he speaks about the difference between corporeal and spiritual man.

**Key words:** Origen, symbolism, icon, Liturgy, being.

In patristic heritage there is the conception of God as a spiritual being and the source of every rational nature.<sup>1</sup> If we understand the term “spiritual” and its synonyms (reasonable, logical, invisible, literal, etc.) exclusively through the category of essence, this understanding leads us to the impossibility to image God — spiritual being par excellence — in a material form and realistically related to matter. That which the ancient philosophical thought defined as eternal, invisible, spiritual, unchangeable is not able to be material at the same time, since the material is transient, that is, changeable, visible, time. Thanks mostly to Origen,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. C. *Cels.* 7:38; *Exh. Martyr.* 47; *Princ.* 1.1.2.

such notion of God entered Christian theology. God who is a spirit (cf. Jn 4:24) could not be depicted in a visible way and portrayed through material symbols. Georges Florovsky, and then other researchers,<sup>2</sup> speculate that Origen's theology, or more precisely his understanding of God as a spiritual being, could be the basis on which later iconoclasts would build their opposition to the worship of icons, i.e. any material representation of God.

On the other hand, the Old Testament forbids any religious use of images and statues that would in any way depict the invisible God. As Damascus later interprets, this was expected because in the Old Testament God had not yet become a body, the Incarnation did not take place and therefore it was not possible to paint God — because the visible image refers to the visible reality. From a historical perspective, the Old Testament prohibition of respecting images and statues might perhaps be associated with polytheistic and pagan cults from which Jews were sometimes very difficult to preserve. In most polytheistic religions, the worship of statues was practiced, but not as the symbols of a higher existence, but precisely as a deification of nature, i.e. creations. The Old Testament itself had very visible symbols by which it manifested communion with Yahweh — in the form of food, clothing, and worship items. In the Old Testament faith, material and visible things are not excluded from communion with God, regardless of the fact that painted icons cannot still exist.

We know that in the Christian, Eastern and Western tradition, reverence for painted icons has won, and that worship or personal prayer cannot be imagined without icons of Christ or saints. However, the attitude towards liturgical symbolism and the manner and degree of its presence in worship in the East and the West, among Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Protestants is not the same. Metropolitan Zizioulas of Pergamon noticed long ago that Protestantism strives to simplify Christian worship and that it is not easy to reconcile the liturgical splendor of the East with the simplicity and modesty of Christ's earthly life.<sup>3</sup> Without going into all kinds of symbolism present in the faith and life of the Church, we will deal with mostly with one of the mentioned — the concept of icon in liturgical context. Through that, as a central moment, we will briefly look at two issues. First, what is the image or icon according to Origen and, second, how, indeed, the painted icon fits into our Christian notion of God who is a spirit, although he was incarnate.

In Origen there is a primary and most important division into the visible and the invisible. Namely, he does not insist so much on the difference between the created and the uncreated, but on this one between the visible and the invisible. As already noted, the invisible does not necessarily mean what is essentially invisible, but also what is now, currently invisible, but will become perceptible over time: "For those things which are invisible are not only not seen, but do

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<sup>2</sup> Florovsky, 1950, pp. 77–96.; Baranov, 2003, pp. 1043–1052.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ζηζιούλας, 1999, pp. 6–21.

not even possess a nature that is able to be seen, which the Greek have called *ἀσώματα*, that is bodiless; whereas the things of which Paul says, *they are not seen*, possess a nature that is able to be seen, but, he explains, they have however not yet been seen by those to whom they are promised.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, what is invisible in its essence is the authentic spiritual nature, which is not only beyond the possibility of any bodily seeing, but even beyond the possibility of complete contemplation, spiritual seeing.<sup>5</sup> In that sense, only the Son of God — the Logos of God — is the one who constantly contemplates the depths of the Father, seeing him directly. All other beings are enabled to know the Father only indirectly and to a lesser extent.<sup>6</sup> In the Commentary on the Gospel of John he says: “*The God* (Ὁ Θεός), therefore, is the true God. The others are gods formed (μορφούμενοι) according to him as images of the prototype (ὡς εἰκόνες πρωτοτύπου). But again, the archetypal image of the many images (ἡ ἀρχέτυπος εἰκὼν) is *the Word* (ὁ Λόγος) with *the God* (πρὸς τὸν Θεόν), who was “in the beginning”. By being “with *the God*” he always continues (ἀεὶ μένων) to be “God”. But he would not have this if he were not with God, and he would not remain God if he did not continue in unceasing contemplation of the depth of the Father.”<sup>7</sup> For Origen, therefore, the Logos of God is an image, that is, an icon of God the Father. He is (as the first icon) the archetypal image of many images — the one who is also ontologically connected with the Father and who makes present the invisible God the Father and reveals Him. Origen’s notion of the icon in the period when it was created shows certain important and interesting theological characteristics. First, the icon is invisible and immaterial. Second, the icon is in ontological connection with the prototype. This second fact will remain crucial later in patristic theology. The icon, as we know, is not an ordinary image, it is not a copy, in the sense in which Plato mentions the copy and the shadow in the myth of the cave, and therefore devalues the value of the image as a copy. In Origen’s teaching, the icon is in essential connection with the prototype — the Father does not exist without the Son as his icon, he is in eternal communion with his Logos, and the Father — Son relationship cannot be exhausted by the

<sup>4</sup> *Princ.* 2.3.6.

<sup>5</sup> Referring to the apostle Paul, Tzamalikos distinguishes between the invisible, which refers to the essence in itself, and the not yet seen, which refers to the manifestation of a thing in time - its gradual disclosure (cf. P. Tzamalikos, 2006, pp. 110–112).

<sup>6</sup> In Origen’s writings, there is a controversial question about the status of the Holy Spirit, whom he includes in three divine persons, but whose hypostasis he subordinates in a certain way. Of course, some researchers say that Origen’s texts also give arguments for the subordination of the Son. First of all, such an interpretation was given by Emperor Justinian in his Decree against Origenism addressed to Patriarch Menas 543, where he says that Origen claimed that the Father is greater than the Son, and the Son than the Spirit, and that Arius took “degrees” in the divine being from Origen.

<sup>7</sup> *Comm. Jn.* 2.2(18). About relationship between God the Father and the Son considering the issue of substance, see: Hanson, 1987, pp. 201–202.

meaning of this relation in human experience. One surviving passage from the Commentary on Genesis says the following:

“God did not begin to be the Father [since] he was prevented from doing so, just as people who become fathers were [prevented] from becoming fathers in any way until then. But, if God is always perfect and belongs to him the ability [power, property] (δύναμις) to be the Father and if it is good that [he] is the Father of such a Son, why would he postpone it and do not accept the good and, so to speak, not be the Father then when can he be a Father? The same can be said in any case of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

According to the Logos, as an eternal prototype, the existing things were made: “For, this Logos is the image and radiance of the invisible God (imago et splendor Dei invisibilis), the Firstborn of all creation (primogenitus omnis creaturae), in which heaven and earth were created, both visible and invisible (sive visibilia sive invisibilia).”<sup>9</sup>

The Logos is the eternal and invisible icon of the eternal and invisible God the Father. According to the Logos and through him, everything is really made — the divine “part” in human being. When he mentions man as an *icon* of God, he thinks on human soul, i.e. spirit. The bodily nature contains no resemblance or affinity with the divine. Unlike Origen, the later fathers defined the icon precisely as visible, tangible, corporeal. So, of the two elements of Origen’s understanding of the icon, one is rejected, the other is taken over. Therefore, it is true that both iconoclasts and defenders of icons could use his texts as a collection of arguments. Iconoclasts could base themselves on his “immaterial” interpretation of the concept of the icon, while the Orthodox could point to a creative and constructive insight that the icon is essentially tied to the prototype and that, thanks to it, we become participants of the divine life. Only the Logos is, therefore, the icon of the Father and the one who reveals him, but the one who gathers many into one, making them deified persons. Also, although Origen does not talk about the same value of the image, i.e. icons and prototypes, according to the spirit of Platonic epistemology, he makes a significant distinction between the image itself and the idol. The image reflects reality, something that truly exists, while the idol is a fabrication, like mythological representations: „For example, if someone should fashion the head of a dog or a ram on human members, or again, devise two faces on one appearance of a man, or join the hindmost parts of a horse or fish to a human breast. He who makes these things and things like them does not make a likeness, but an idol. For he makes what is not, nor is there anything like it. And, therefore, knowing these things the Apostle says, *an idol is nothing in the world* (1Cor 8,4) for no form is adopted from existing things but that which the idle and curious mind itself perceived in itself.”<sup>10</sup> In any case,

<sup>8</sup> *Comm. Gen.* D4, 66–67 (Eusebius Caesarensis, *Contra Marcellum* I 4 (GCS Eus. 4, 22, 6–18)).

<sup>9</sup> *Comm. Cant. Prol.* 2.17.

<sup>10</sup> *Hom. Ex.*, 8.3.

Origen takes the first step towards establishing a Christian notion of the icon. The weakness of his concept of icon is that it is too spiritualized, and that, following Plotinian reflections on the being, he introduces a certain subordination between the prototype and the image, that is, icon of prototype. In that sense, when he determines the relationship between God the Father and the Logos, as icons of the Father, he says that some qualities are reserved only for the Father, so only the Father is αὐτόθεος and αὐτοαγαθόν. Also, although man is godlike, Origen says that he is “according to the icon”, and not the icon of God himself.

“For as the Father is very God (αὐτόθεος) and true God (ἀληθινὸς Θεὸς) in relation to the image (πρὸς εἰκόνα) and images of the image (εἰκόνας τῆς εἰκόνας) (wherefore also men are said to be “according to the image” not “images”), so is the very Word in relation to the reason in each one. For both hold the place of a source (πηγῆς); the Father, that of divinity (θεότητος), the Son, that of reason (Λόγου). As, therefore, there are many gods, but for us there is “one God, the Father” (Ὡσπερ οὖν θεοὶ πολλοὶ, ἀλλ’ ἡμῖν εἷς Θεὸς ὁ Πατήρ), and there are many lords (κύριοι), but for us there is “one Lord (εἷς Κύριος), Jesus Christ”, so there are many words (λόγοι), but we pray that the Word (Λόγος) who is in the beginning, who is with God, God the Word, may be with us.”<sup>11</sup>

This distinction that Origen makes between the Logos as the first, eternal and only „complete“ icon of the Father and humans, i.e. of rational beings who are „according to the icon“ indicates one special order or structure or, more precisely, a subordination of the Plotinian type. Origen believes that it is important to point out a certain hierarchy when it comes to the concept of icon of God. That is why, strictly speaking, just as the term God, with the definite article, in the full and basic sense of the word, relates exclusively to God the Father (only he is ὁ Θεός), so the term icon refers in the basic and narrowest sense to the Son. *One* God, according to him, has *one* icon of his own — one Son, and all the others are according to the icon, namely, beings who iconize the Logos, and by participating in Him acquire rationality. The Logos is, as Origen explicitly says, the source of reason. Based on that, the soul is divine and rational. However, it is not directly an icon of God, but an icon of an icon — an icon of the Logos. In the later theology of the Fathers, we also read that man is an icon of God because he was created through the Logos, so he is also an icon of God the Father because he is an icon of the Logos. Nevertheless, by later Fathers there is no impression of subordination between the icon and what is *according* to the icon. Man in himself is an icon of Christ, as defines St. Maxim, but in principle he is an icon of the Holy Trinity. This is because He was created to exist the way God exists — in love and freedom. Freedom, expressed as a community, i.e. love is the element that makes man an icon of God. According to Origen, rationality, i.e. reason is something what makes man an icon of the God Logos. In this respect there is a difference between Origen and the later fathers. John of Damascus, a theologian who was especially dedicated to the defense of Church art, but also

<sup>11</sup> *Comm. Jn. 2.3.* (20–21).

to the study of the concept of the icon in principle, distinguishes several types of icons, i.e. a few meanings of this term. Thus, the icon refers to the Son of God, as well as to man, the Holy Scriptures and also to the symbols of future events. The Son is the “natural and first” icon of the Father, while man is also an icon, but not by nature, but by imitation.<sup>12</sup> When it comes to the Son of God, he says: “An image is a likeness depicting an archetype, but having some difference from it; the image is not like the archetype in every way. The Son is a living, natural and undeviating image of the Father, bearing in himself the whole Father, equal to him in every respect, differing only in being caused. For the Father is the natural cause, and the Son is caused; for the Father is not from the Son, but the Son from the Father.”<sup>13</sup> Damascus says that man was created to be an icon of God, and that this is done by participating in the divine life, that is. by union with God — “John the theologian, who leant on Christ’s breast, therefore says, that *we shall be like him* (1Jn 3,2): For just as iron plunged in fire does not become fire by nature, but by union and burning and participation, so what is deified does not become God by nature, but by participation.”<sup>14</sup> Damascus, as it is known, has an affirmative attitude towards material, painted icons. His well-known view is that God, being incarnate, shows himself now through the body and that we have the opportunity to glorify him in this way — “Of old, God the incorporeal and formless was never depicted, but now that God has been seen in the flesh and has associated with human kind, I depict what I have seen of God. I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked.”<sup>15</sup>

When it comes to other liturgical symbols — gifts that are offered and consecrated — in Origen we find a partial similarity with Damascus’ interpretation of the meaning of the symbol. Namely, Origen asserts that the material essence in itself cannot contain the meaning of the symbol and there is no reason for its worship: „it is not material in the Bread but the word that is uttered over it that is of grace to the one who eats it worthy [not unworthy] of the Lord”.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, he goes a step further compared to the later fathers and excludes material nature from the final and essential communion with God. He excludes material nature from the final meaning of the liturgical event — the gifts of nature do not enter into close communion with God, but they are lost because they point ‘symbolically’ to the true spiritual meaning.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, 3,18.

<sup>13</sup> *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, 1,9.

<sup>14</sup> *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, 1,19.

<sup>15</sup> *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, 1,16.

<sup>16</sup> *Comm. Matt.* 11.14.

“Because it was not the visible bread, which he holds in his hands, that which Logos called his body, but the word, in whose place that bread was to be broken in a mysterious way. And he did not call that visible drink his blood, but the word, in whose place that drink should have been poured out in a mysterious way. For the flesh or blood of the Word of God, what can be other than the word that nourishes and the word that makes the heart rejoice (Ps 104,5)? Why didn’t he say: *This is the bread of the New Covenant*, as he said: *This is the blood of the New Covenant*? For bread is the word of righteousness, which souls eat and thus nourish; drink is the word of knowledge of Christ, so they correspond to the mystery of his birth and suffering.”<sup>17</sup>

Origen sees in the Eucharist only the spiritual side, which was the basis on which later researchers define his interpretation as the spiritualization of the Liturgy.<sup>18</sup> Somewhat more insights similar to this can be found in Origen’s newly discovered homilies, where he allegorically interprets the Old Testament Passover, as well as the New Testament Eucharist.<sup>19</sup> “Namely, in the hidden and invisible unleavened loaves of *chastity and truth* (1 Corinthians 5,8) they keep the meal: they also eat Christ, the Passover sacrificed for us, who says: *He who does not eat my flesh has no eternal life* (Jn 6,53f). And by drinking his Blood, the true Drink, they coat the upper thresholds of houses [cf. Exodus 12,7] of their souls and thus do not seek as [some] respect from men, but from God, who sees invisibly.”<sup>20</sup> The conclusion is, therefore, that the Eucharist has a material side, but that it is fulfilled and accomplished in the soul to the end.<sup>21</sup> In another place he emphasizes that spiritual nourishment, i.e. food, however, does not refer to anything of a physical nature, and that *we do not want to give up athletic to food* (Οὐ θέλεις σαυτὸν ἐνδοῦναι τῇ τροφῇ τῇ ἀθλητικῇ)<sup>22</sup> when we practice Pasha (whether it is in the temple or outside it).

Indirectly and based on Origen’s general position on liturgical symbols, on the one hand, and bearing in mind his understanding of the concept of the icon, on the other, we can conclude that Origen’s attitude towards painted icons is not identical to the perspectives of iconoclasts — since he allows visible symbols. Nevertheless, it is not entirely similar to the later patristic tradition because he considers that every visible symbol is relative and serves only to foreshadow the prototype but later loses its material substance when it fulfills its purpose. In the Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs, he says that when the word *love* is used to denote love of art or other human creations (geometry, music,

<sup>17</sup> *Comm. Series. Matt.* 85.

<sup>18</sup> There is a comprehensive study on this topic: Lies, 1978.

<sup>19</sup> There are many studies on significance of allegorical interpretation in Origen’s writings. Two most comprehensive are: Lubac, 1968 and Hanson, 2002.

<sup>20</sup> *Comm. Series. Matt.* 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Hom. Luc.* 12,9; 5,8; L. Lies, 1978, p. 147.

<sup>22</sup> *Hom. Ps.77* IV,4.

arithmetic), “such use of the word love is not commendable”.<sup>23</sup> From the context of Origen’s thought as a whole, we are able to conclude that all visible symbols are of secondary importance. The lack of discourse about them can also be taken as an indicator of such conclusion, although this should not be taken as an infallible criterion. Origen does not reject liturgical symbols, but spiritualizes them and understands them as temporary means. The symbols are there to indicate a higher meaning, not to survive as such or to indicate the transformation of visible matter in Christ. Just as a human being is necessarily and temporary clothed with a body, since in this world it is necessary for him, so a prayer, that is, communication with God, is *clothed* with symbols, but only during history and until the consummation of the world. It is the same thing with the visible essence of the Scripture, i.e. the literal or historical sense of Scripture, as well as with our entire cosmos. Among others, there is also Origen’s insight that flora and fauna will not be saved in eschatological being.

Unlike Maximus the Confessor, who sees the entire material world as a future cosmic Liturgy, material world, as well as liturgical symbols, are, according to Origen, only the means and instruments which should point to a higher, invisible and spiritual being. Symbols and icons are guidelines that teach the soul, organized in this way by God’s providence. Therefore, they cannot be bad, but also they cannot be a part of a perfect being. This ‘row’ of icons, which begins with the first, perfect and spiritual symbols and goes down to the less important and less perfect represents the transformation of the Platonic and Plotinian ontology and its application on the Church theology. However, Origen did not remain entirely “Greek”. His insight about the icon as a symbol essentially related to the prototype points to a different and new ontological insight that is being born at the beginnings of patristic theology.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Prol. Comm. Cant.* 2.40.



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## Ориген и симболизам у Литургији: Учење знаменитог Александријца о црквеној уметности

Овај рад има за циљ да испита однос између Литургије као службе која је прожета симболима (и свим врстама уметничког израза) и једног типично спиритуалистичког погледа на заједницу са Богом. Једно од кључних питања јесте да дефинише Оригенов поглед на литургијски симболизам, те однос између литургијски изражене заједнице света и Бога и насупрот томе постављене спиритуалистичке духовности. Међу богословским студијама и истраживањима, постоје нека мишљења која повезују Оригена са иконоборачким ставовима. Према поменутиим мишљенима, Оригенов појам о апсолутно бестелесном Богу, те непомирљив однос између духовне и материјалне природе утицали су на одбацивање икона у Цркви у потоњим временима. Имајући у виду ове претпоставке, покушаћемо да их анализирамо кроз следеће кораке. Најпре, биће дефинисан концепт тела и материјалног бивства, те контраст, у онтолошком смислу, између тела и духа, односно душе. Други аспект састоји се од покушаја да се реконструишу Оригенови увиди о симболима и икони. Премда не постоји тематски одређен и тако насловљен осврт о овоме међу његовим списима, непосредно и посредно се ови увиди могу извести из адекватних егзегетских и других одломака. Ова анализа укључује излагање о појму иконе на местима где Ориген пише о Логосу као икони невидљивога Оца, као и разматрање појма иконе у контексту онтолошке дихотомије видљиво — невидљиво.

**Key words:** Ориген, симболизам, икона, Литургија, биће.

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