

THE THEOLOGICAL SYMBOLISM OF COLOURS IN BYZANTINE ICONOGRAPHY

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Abstract: Colours have significant importance in Byzantine iconography. They are filled with profound theological symbolism, transcending the everyday dimension of life that envisions only the aesthetic. Thus, to pervade the mystery of the icon, certain elementary notions that enquire the mystical symbolism of colours need to be acquired firstly. These details offer us a much clearer perspective on the theological teaching and message conveyed by the Byzantine icon/picture. Therefore, the present study is aimed to present the theological symbolism of colour, which is intrinsically related to the celestial and divine realities and the mystical take on life. In this respect, we will focus on colours like gold, brass, red, blue, and, of course, white, and black to emphasize the theological connotations that these colours embrace in Byzantine art. This research will refer to certain details from the Holy Scriptures, the mystical vision of Saint Dionysius, the Areopagite related to colours, and the international and Romanian literature on this matter.

Keywords: colour, theological symbolism, Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, mystic, celestial realities

Introduction

In the Byzantine icon, all elements are loaded with a special symbolism, both regarding lines, dimensions, morphology, and colour. The most profound symbolism, with an implicit theological dimension, is offered by colour (Ienculescu 2010, 30). Through colour, one can distinguish, as through a mirror (1Cor 13:12), that which is beyond, and that we will eschatologically see with our eyes. The Kingdom of Heavens, which, according to the prophet Ezekiel, is light and colour, can be mystically perceived through colour nuances. Ezekiel compares the shining light of the human-like image which stood on the throne of glory (Ez 1:26) to a rainbow that appears on the firmament during rain (Ez 1:28). Thus, the image of the Lord's glory is seen through colours that are brought to existence by the divine light that flooded the prophet's astonished eyes. Moreover, the images that progressively contributed to the depiction of divine glory were made of colours: the fiery tide which spread shining rays (Ez 1:4), the metal that shone in the blazing fire (Ez 1:4), the hoofs that sparked like shining brass (Ez 1:7), the appearance of beasts like burning embers or lit torches (Ez 1:13), the rays and lighting bolts that emerged from fire (Ez 1:13), the wheels attached to beasts that had the appearance of chrysolite (Ez 1:16), the vault that resembled the purest crystal (Ez 1:22), the throne that had the appearance of sapphire (Ez 1:26); and the incandescent metal (Pașca-Tușa, 2017, 57-72; Pașca-Tușa, Popa-Bota 2019, 5-20).

All these chromatic elements shed light on the image of beasts, and then on the Image of the One Who stood on the throne. This theophanic account provides the biblical setting for understanding the importance of colours in the process of revealing the image. Colours, like the image of the rainbow employed by the prophet Ezekiel to depict the glory of God, are in relation with the image that they shed light on and make

perceptible to the spiritual eyes of those who grasp its sight. Using the colour palette employed by the prophet who likened the glow of divine glory to the colours of the rainbow, the painter/iconographer can depict the mystery of the divine light. This light pervades the entire world in a variety of colours, casting its rays through that vault that is above celestial power, compared to the purest crystal. Therefore, through the colours used and their implicit symbolism, we can contemplate, through the icon, a mystical image of the Kingdom (Quenot 1993, 168).

In Byzantine iconography, colours have, besides their usual symbolism, a theological connotation that is based both on the Holy Scriptures and the Patristic theology. In the present study, we will relate to Saint Dionysius, the Areopagites' writing, which has a unique vision that is related to celestial beings and realities. In this manner, we intend to emphasize the fact that the employment of colours in Byzantine art is not randomly carried out, but, to the contrary, is based on a deep understanding of the realities depicted through religious art means (Cotețiu 2016a, 12-13). Thus, in the present research, we will search to emphasize the theological symbolism and a spiritual perspectives colours have in Byzantine art. In this endeavour, as we previously anticipated, we will make use of Saint Dionysius' *On the celestial hierarchy* writing, and of certain other international works on iconography and Byzantine art (Constantine Cavarnos, John Cage, Michel Quenot, Egon Sendler, etc.), also relating to the works of Romanian scholars (Constantin Tudor, Marin Cotețiu, Marius Ghenescu, Victoria Grădinar-Man, Marcel Muntean, Claudia Trif etc.).

The first part of the research is aimed to mark the limits and concepts regarding the theological symbolism of colours apart from the obvious mundane symbolism, and we will provide the instruments for a proper understanding of the spiritual symbolism of colours. Then, we will link the symbolic dimension of colours to the celestial realities, both regarding the glory of God, or the angelic beings (brass and gold, fiery red, purple, orange, and white). The last part of this research will show the mystical significance of certain colours that symbolize the mystical darkness of divine realities or spiritual life (blue, earthly tones, green and black). Thus, we will provide the reader with instruments to understand the mystical significance of the icon.

1. Theological symbolism of colours and their esthetical reasons

Colours belong to the realm of symbols, each having its precise theological meaning, even though they sometimes open antithetic realities. For example, black designates the impenetrable darkness that surrounds divine mysteries, but it is also a mark of sinful decadence. In this respect, in Byzantine art esthetical reasons are not primordial, but the symbolic functions of colour are (Grădinar-Man 2013, 41; Petrovan 2020, 1141-1148). The iconographer uses the symbolism of colours to convey the message of the theological reality it symbolizes. Therefore, colours are not randomly employed or chosen in Byzantine iconography. Each colour has its unique symbolism and significance (Tarabukin 2008, 170-171). The valences of colours do not entirely correspond to their nature but are determined by the ideas that they symbolize. Thus, the images rise beyond the depicted realities, embracing a spiritual character.

The main colours (red, blue, green, ochre, white or black) keep their symbolism over time, but their intensity can determine a certain development of a symbol in a certain direction or way, without any possibility to undergo major changes. At the same time, the joining of some colours can be a means to create a new symbolism, apart from the individual one. For example, the mixture of black and dark blue is used to depict the impenetrable and inaccessible mystery of divine nature, while the mixture of black and green indicates decadence, ageing, and mortification (Grădinar-Man 2013, 44). If we consider the intensity, the transparent character of colour can create premises for transcending symbolism that presents the theology of spiritualized faces, images. However, the opaque or compact appearance of colour expresses the durability and the implicit materiality of a body or thing. The third manner of colour rendering (that avoids semitones) symbolizes intense emotions (Gusev, Dunaev, Karelin 2007, 311).

Aside from these aspects, it is necessary to consider the fact that through colours iconographers/painters separate visibly the celestial realities from earthly ones. This demarcation is carried out firstly through a precise categorization of colours: red, blue, green, and white as symbols of life, and grey, brown, ochre, and black which relate to the idea of death (Lăzărescu 2009, 40). Another defining element is represented by the golden halo and the yellow background of icons. These colours suggest the presence of a light that transcends this world, belonging to the divine glory that is revealed to the contemplator (Grădinar-Man 2013, 44).

In the Byzantine icon, colours possess a symbolism that is different from the profane symbolism of earthly realities. The Eastern perspective is based on a rigorous complex of ideas that directs colour towards celestial realities. Saint Dionysius the Areopagite considers that in a spiritual logic, colours belong to the world of symbols, for they define the being of celestial powers (Muntean 2012, 290). He states that the depiction of angels in the Holy Scriptures reveals the mystery of their being or nature. In other words, the colours that depict the vestments of angels are revelatory for their nature. Therefore, they are assimilated to fire (Ps 104:5), are clothed with brass (Ez 1:7; 40:3; Dn 10:6; Rev 1:15), electron (Ez 1:4.27; 8,2) or multicolour stones Ez 1:26; 10:1.9; Rev 4:3; 21:18). These nuances unveil the “uncorrupted shine, unceasing and pure, golden like, and beautiful, luminous and celestial shine” (Sf. Dionisie Areopagitul 1996, 38). Each colour has a transcendent meaning that reveals and empowers at the same time the mysteries of heavenly realities that, besides light, are also characterized by colours.

2. The colours of the Heavenly Kingdom and holiness

In Saint Dionysius interpretation, **brass** and **gold** suggest their fiery and burning nature, often symbolized through the image of fire. Cherubim, one of the angelic divisions of the first triad, have a fiery appearance (*burning embers* or *burning torches* – Ez 1:13), are armed with fiery swords (Gen 1:3) and are assimilated to the image of fiery wheels, burning circles, similar to chrysolite (Ez 1:15-21; 10:9-17). Seraphim are like them; ever burning and incandescent, they cast off “all darkness” (Sf. Dionisie Areopagitul 1996, 23-4). Therefore, gold and brass become symbols of divine purity and

cleansing that consume all impurity and corruption. The proximity of these celestial powers to God, Who is consuming fire determines their manifestation as pure fire, is a detail that is depicted in iconographic representations (McGuckin 2004, 286). Thus, these colours also symbolize divine light. Gold is seen by iconographers as a source of light. Given this fact, the Slavic ermines name golden background of icon *svet* (light) (Sendler 2005, 183; Ghenescu 2010, 470).

Pure yellow is not used in iconography, but only its golden nuance. *Golden yellow* is one of the few colours that Saint Dionysius the Areopagite attaches theological symbolism to (Muntean 2012, 292). This solar colour directly relates to Jesus Christ, Who is named the Light of the world (Mal 3,20), the Above Sunrise (Lk 1:78), Light (Jn 1:8), Light of the world (Jn 8,14).

The golden nuance of yellow is also employed in the saints' halos or the background of icons because it is not constrained by earthly determinations, but by spiritual ones (Apopei 2007). This background symbolizes the Heavens or the Kingdom of Heavens where all is pervaded and filled by the divine light that flows from the Holy Trinity (Tarabukin 2008, 172). Raw yellow also has a negative aspect, symbolizing corruption, betrayal and vice when associated with the golden coin.

White symbolizes the glow of heavenly glory and is *related* to the divine light (Sf. Dionisie Areopagitul 1996, 38). In this respect, the precise symbolism of white intertwines with the symbolism of gold that suggests holiness, purity, and divine energy, able to ascend earthly beings to a cleansed and pure life (Trif 2009, 403). At the same time, white is perceived in iconography as a way of revealing the heavenly reality (Cotețiu 2019, 7). The climax of the theophany that occurred on Mount Tabor depicts Lord Jesus Christ's "raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so, as no fuller to earth can white them." (Mk 9:3). The light on the face of Jesus Christ that was powerful like the sun (Mat 17:2) caused his raiment to transform in an exceeding glowing white (Lk 9:29) (Pașca-Tușa, Trif, Popa-Bota 2021, 151-167). The Transfiguration icon shows Lord Jesus Christ on the top of Mount Tabor in white clothes, spreading from his raiment glowing rays of white or gold (Kontoglu 1993, 166), all around Himself (Cavarnos 2005, 88). The depiction of divine glory through the tetragon filled with light symbolizes the uncreated light that fills the eyes of the contemplator with the luminous knowledge of God.

Red has a much broader symbolism. Its understanding requires a reappraisal of the theme of angelic power that is represented using fire-related nuances (Cotețiu 2016b, 135). In the vision of Saint Dionysius, red shows the incandescence of those who are by nature *flaming fire* (Ps 104:5). Angelic beings are covered by the divine fire and keep carry out with ardour the act of cleansing and casting off the impure and unclean (Sf. Dionisie Areopagitul 1996, 38). Red is a symbol consecrated to life. Its connection (even from a linguistic perspective) with blood "filled with life" (Gen 9:4) is obvious. Even though red symbolizes sacrifice and death, the idea of life is not excluded from the symbolism of this colour. This fact is due to the perspective of substitution, expiation, and then resurrection that both the Old and New Testament proclaim. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ had an expiatory character; mankind is saved from death and His blood

became the source of eternal life. This exegetic perspective makes us understand how the chosen ones of Israel (mentioned in the Apocalypse) were given white garments after they washed them in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14). Paradoxically, the blood of Christ purifies, as we saw in the account of transfiguration on Mount Tabor (Mk 9:3). Therefore, martyrs who sacrificed their life for keeping their faith are often depicted wearing red garments (Cornwell 2009, 66). This explains why red is used in the background of certain icons, precisely to symbolize the joy and happiness of eternal life or heaven (for example, notice the mosaic of the Final Judgement in Basilica of Saint Apollinaris of Ravenna). Besides this positive symbolism, red also has a negative meaning, symbolizing selfishness, hatred, devilish pride, and, by extension, the flames of hell.

The red purplish colour or **purple** symbolizes royalty and divine or, in other words, the power and testimony of consecration (Sendler 2005,167). In Antiquity and Middle Ages, purple was a colour destined exclusively to the members of royalty and high priests of the Church (Quenot 1993, 81-2). The Holy Scriptures had a tremendous influence in generalizing purple in the above categories because prophet Daniel wore such a garment (Dn 5:7) as well as Jonathan, the High Priest of Israel, was also clothed in purple garments and clothes (1Mak 10:20) (Tudor 2003, 347). The Byzantine emperors used to wear purple, except for the moments they attended liturgic rituals. For the same reasons, painters/iconographers depicted the *maforion* of Theotokos using the same colour (Muntean 2012, 292).

Orange in iconography is associated with flames. As such, this colour is related to red and its symbolism, explained above by Saint Dionysius. In iconography, this colour is used for the cloven tongues of fire that sat upon each of the Apostles at Pentecost. This bloody orange symbolizes the transfigured humanity, suggesting a work of transfiguration of human nature and resembling incandescent heavenly powers (Coman 2017).

3. Colour with mystical symbolism

Darkness, depicted in iconography by dark tones (especially blue) and implicitly by **black**, does not hold negative connotations regarding God. From the creation account, we see that darkness and light are not antagonistic. Darkness is not as good and beautiful as light, but it does not hold an evil nature within. Darkness symbolizes and suggests mystery, shadow, and depth (Sf. Dionisie Areopagitul 1996, 38). If we see these characteristics in connection with the knowledge of God, we will understand that darkness only empowers the mystery of God. The theophany on mount Sinai lets us understand darkness as a revelatory setting. Moses enters the darkness of God, He who is light (Ex 20:21). In other words, the darkness that surrounds God is paradoxically pervaded by light, even though the material eyes cannot grasp the sight of this divine reality (Chirilă 2018, 214; Chirilă, Pașca-Tușa, Popa-Bota, Trif 2018, 96-108). Saint Dionysius likens the ascent of the mountain and the entry of Moses in the darkness with the direct and unmediated sight of God. For him, the divine darkness is an unapproachable light, inhabited by God (cf. 1Tim 6:16). (Sf. Dionisie Areopagitul

1996,258) Thus we will better understand the perspective of Saint Maximus the Confessor who claims that God's revelation in darkness is greater than the light covering the experience of mystics who saw the divine light of God (Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul 1993, 15). Based on these facts, the monk robes are black to suggest withdrawal from the world of sin, a fundamental requirement for seeing God. In iconography, the mystical presence of God is marked by three semicircles set upside in which the blessing hand of God is portrayed. The intensity of the colours grows from dark blue to black. Black also holds a negative connotation, symbolizing devil, death, chaos, and the abyss of God forsaken existence. Often, black is used in iconographic representations as a contrasting background for life-giving elements: the cave of nativity, Lazarus' tomb, the cave under the Cross of Lord and the darkness of hell in the icon of Resurrection (Quenot 1993,13).

Blue is a celestial colour par excellence. In its darkest nuances, it symbolizes the impenetrable mystery of the divine nature (Trif 2009, 403). The concentric semicircles at the top of the icons represented through nuances of blue that grow darker as they get close to the centre suggest the mystical presence of God Who dwells in unapproachable darkness (according to Ex 20:21). When blue is used as background in depicting certain biblical accounts or iconographical accounts of the lives of saints, it is used to transcend the historical perspective of the narrative and to project that specific event in an eschatological perspective, in heavenly realities. In other words, blue is a spiritual colour that relates to transcendence, through its force to spiritualize the surrounding elements (Sendler 2005, 164). As a spiritual immaterial, colour, blue, in its brighter nuances suggest transparency, the spiritualization of the human body and pneumatization. Blue is indicative of the human spiritualization in iconography and shows human nature's openness to divine energies and divine light (Stăniloae 1977, 288). Among the depictions that illustrate the creation account, blue is often used to portray the celestial vault, the waters above the vault and the infinity of the atmosphere (Quenot 1993, 28). This colour is also employed to depict the garments of Jesus Christ and Theotokos, suggesting both divine nature and humility (Quenot 1993, 79). In stained glass, blue is prevailing in medieval stained glass suggesting the love of God that covers the entire creation.

Between black and **brown**, there is a conceptual connection, like that between blue and black (Gage 1999, 40). However, this earthly colour is a symbol of transience and perishability but also of humility. Usually, brown is the colour of the monks' robes, symbolizing their refusal to live in the world. When sallow is used in the garment of Theotokos, it suggests her human nature (Dragan 2017).

Green is a colour that usually designates hope and natural life. This meaning is also present in the spiritual understanding of its chromatic but gains new meanings in connection with the action and presence of the Holy Spirit (Quenot 1993, 82). For this reason, green symbolizes spiritual regeneration and final victory against death. Green represents eternal youth and vitality (Sendler 2005, 162). It is also the colour that depicts the prophets who are *whistles* of the Holy Spirit and Evangelist John, who proclaimed the coming of the Holy Spirit in the world (Tudor 2003, 346-7). Martyrs are

also depicted with green clothes because, through their sacrifice, they keep the working and the lively nature of Christ's Church (Muntean 2012, 292).

Conclusion

Colours, through their symbolic dimension, have become a means of knowledge and, at the same time, of encrypting heavenly realities in icons. These have created a language that, once learned and assumed, can offer the contemplator the possibility to be part of the mystery revealed through light and colours by the painter/iconographer. In Byzantine art, colours possess a noticeable theological symbolism. Polychrome is in such a way fashioned by the artist to cast light on the face of the one depicted in the icon. Nuances, colour intensity, and esthetical effects converge in one point that, thus, defines the icon: the unseen and mystical image of God. Without a symbolic relationship between the colour that makes the image visible and perceptible and the prototype that they represent, the icon would not reach the maximal stage of revelation.

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