

Christine Chaillot
Independent researcher

The Role of Pictures, the Veneration of Icons and the Representation of Christ in Two Oriental Orthodox Churches of the Coptic and Ethiopian Traditions¹

Abstract: The Oriental Orthodox Churches include the Churches of the Coptic and Ethiopian traditions and also of the Syrian and Armenian traditions which will not be mentioned here. The veneration of icons is similar in all the Churches of Orthodox tradition. They do speak of “veneration” of the persons represented on the icons and pictures (Christ, the Virgin and the saints). They do not speak of “adoration” or “worship” of these persons or of the icons as only God is adored, and worshiping icons would be idolatrous. This veneration is especially known in the so-called Eastern Orthodox (of the Greek, Russian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Serbian traditions) or Churches having accepted the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, but also in the Oriental Orthodox Churches, which is less known.

Keywords: icons, veneration (of icons), theology (of icons), miraculous icons, iconoclasm

In September 1990, in the Second Agreed Statement and Recommendations to Churches approved by the Joint Commission of the bilateral Official Theological Dialogue between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches in Chambésy (Geneva), it was stated that: “In relation to the teaching of

¹ This article initially was a lecture given during the Meeting of the Association Dialogue between Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox at the Institute of Theology of Saint-Serge in Paris, on November 19, 2013.

the Seventh Ecumenical Council of the Orthodox Church, the Oriental Orthodox agree that the theology and practice of the veneration of icons taught by that Council are in basic agreement with the teaching and practice of the Oriental Orthodox from ancient times, long before the convening of the Council, and that we have no disagreement in this regard” (Chaillot, Belopopsky 1988: 63f.).

In 1993, I published a book on this topic entitled *Rôle des images et vénération des icônes dans les Eglises orthodoxes orientales*, with a Foreword by Metropolitan Damaskinos, then Co-President of this bilateral Dialogue

In this book I then proved that: 1) there exist pictures, wall paintings, illuminations and icons with representations of Christ, of the Virgin and of the Saints in all the Oriental Orthodox Churches of the Coptic, Syriac, Armenian and Ethiopian rites; 2) in all these Oriental Orthodox Churches, icons are venerated. With this aim in mind, I made a short demonstration of the four traditions throughout the centuries, since the beginning of Christianity until today, with a presentation of different texts of these traditions through their history, lives of Saints, accounts of travelers,² etc. Many of such texts are translated into our western languages.³ I shall give here examples of the Coptic and Ethiopian traditions belonging to these very ancient Churches in Africa.

Icons, paintings and art history

First of all, what can be said in a few words about art history? What follows are some indications about the most ancient paintings/icons/illuminations kept in the Coptic and Ethiopian traditions. It must be underscored that many paintings and icons, being fragile, have not resisted time or have been destroyed, for example by Muslims (being iconoclast) such as the Ommayad Calif Yezid II, who promulgated in 721 an edict ordaining the destruction

² For example Vansleb, who visited Coptic churches and monasteries in the 17th century.

³ See for example the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalis* (CSCO), and the *Patrologie orientale* (PO).

of all the Christian paintings, including in Egypt; or during the invasion by Ahmed Gragn (1527-1543) in Ethiopia in the 16th century. At this time many churches and monasteries as well as nearly all religious items (including icons, manuscripts with illuminations, etc) were destroyed, which explain why we have very little art and few artifacts left/kept of the previous centuries.

In Egypt, wall paintings of the 6th-8th centuries have been preserved, such as those of Bawit and Saqqarah. The most ancient Coptic icon known today, representing Christ and Abbot Menas, dated to the 7th century, is kept in the Louvre Museum.⁴ A great selection of Coptic icons can also be found in National Museum in Warsaw, Poland. In the Coptic manuscripts, we find illuminations of which the most ancient go back to the 9th-10th centuries. Among the most beautiful and ancient icons to be seen in Egypt, let us name those of the churches in Old Cairo, in the Coptic Museum and in the monasteries.⁵

In Ethiopia, (as already mentioned) many pieces of art were destroyed in particular during Gragn's attack in the 16th century, and also before. The two most ancient illuminated manuscripts known today have recently been definitely assigned to the late 5th-early 7th centuries by radiocarbon analysis: the two Gospels of the Monastery of Abuna Garima, near Axum.⁶ The most ancient wall paintings may be dated to the 11th-12th centuries (church of Yemrehanna Krestos) and the most ancient preserved icon has been dated to the 15th century (Virgin and Child by Fere Tseyon ("The Fruit of Sion", of the Monastery of Daga Estifanos in Lake Tana).⁷

⁴ It was found in Middle Egypt, in the ruins of the Monastery of Bawit excavated since 1900 by the French archeologist Jean Clédat.

⁵ The contemporary Coptic iconography follows the research made by Isaac Fanous (d. 2007), who was a student of Leonid Ouspensky in Paris.

⁶ <http://www.ethiopianheritagefund.org/> [last accessed June, 2016].

⁷ In Ethiopia, in the monasteries and churches, ancient icons are kept in the "treasure house".

About Icons

Icons are painted on wood and are to be found especially in the Byzantine, Coptic and Ethiopian traditions, but also in the Syriac and Armenian ones. In all these traditions, the number of illuminations in the ancient manuscripts, with similar representations of those found on icons, is important.

The mandylion is considered a kind of prototype of the icon of Christ: it is the picture of Christ which was brought from Jerusalem to King Abgar in Edessa, the ancient capital of Syriac culture. According to André Grabar, this picture “not made by human hands” proves, better than any other argument, that the representation of Christ is legitimate”.⁸ The mandylion is known and mentioned in the texts of the four Oriental Orthodox Churches and is venerated there by the faithful.

What are the words used to refer to “icon” and “picture”? In the Coptic tradition, the Coptic word is “limni”; that was borrowed from Greek is “eikon”, and that was taken from Arabic (coming from Greek) is “iquna”. In Ethiopia, the Geez word is “se’el”; the word “ayqunâ” is also found.

The icons /representations of Christ/ of his festivals: Themes and iconographical canons

In the four traditions of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, Christ is represented on all the icons of the main festivals to tell the principal episodes of his life in the liturgical year. Christ is often represented with the Virgin who presents Him to the faithful as being the Savior of the world (Grabar 1931:26). Universal as well as local Saints are also represented. In the Oriental Orthodox Churches the iconographical themes as well as iconographical canons are similar to those of the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Regarding Ethiopian iconography, according to Jules Leroy, Ethiopia, which was evangelized by Syrians and Egyptians, also developed links with Byzantium, following their iconographical

⁸ André Grabar, *La Sainte Face de Laon: le Mandylion dans l'art orthodoxe* (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum 1931), 26.

canons, while maintaining a proper character being not Byzantino-Oriental, nor African (Gerster 1970: 62).

Some illustrations/illuminations/icons reproduce local life, for example on the Ethiopian icons of the representation of the Flight to Egypt which shows an Ethiopian family travelling and carrying its local utensils (baskets, pots, gourds). According to the Copt Abu al Barakat (14th c.), the Fathers gave symbolic signs to the pictures: the nimbus, the position of the fingers, etc.⁹ New icons continue to be painted until today.¹⁰

Style of the icons/Oriental Orthodox iconographical canons of paintings and illuminations/copies of Byzantine models

The icon painters must follow specific rules, that are iconographical canons. The icons are not just artistic paintings but they play a religious and pedagogical role in the Oriental Churches. In principle, one must meditate and pray before painting icons, as they are religious art. Icons are often painted by monks and nuns and even priests. According to the Ethiopian priest Kesa of Gondar (1932), one must meditate and pray in order to paint (Merier 1992: 145).

Some of them are copied from icons or steel engravings brought from abroad. In Ethiopia, we know that icons were sent and brought back from Jerusalem and Egypt (Spencer 1972: 71f.). Some pictures and stamps were brought from western Europe, for example that of the Virgin and Child of the Church of Saint Mary the Greater in Rome, an image of Byzantine type which was one of the prototypes of the icons of the Virgin in Ethiopia.¹¹ Sometimes Greek Orthodox

⁹ “Sur l’emploi des images, des icônes et des chants”, the 24th chapter of his liturgical encyclopædia, *La Lampe des Ténèbres pour éclairer l’intelligence du service liturgique*.

¹⁰ For example, after twenty one Copts were beheaded by Islamists in Libya in February 2015, they were recognized as martyrs by the Coptic Orthodox Church and an icon representing them was painted.

¹¹ http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salus_populi_romani [last accessed, June 2016]; see also (Chojnacki 1983).

painters were mandated to paint icons for the Oriental Orthodox Churches. This demonstrates that contacts continued to exist between the two families of Churches in daily life and throughout the centuries, in spite of the schism of Chalcedon in 451. For example, the icon of Evangelist Saint Mark, which was ordered by the Copts to be painted by a Greek, Stephanos Therianos, for the Church of the Muhalaqah in Old Cairo, and which is painted and signed by him. In Egypt, we find iconostases painted by Greeks for and in Coptic Orthodox churches, for example in the Church of Saint Mark (the ancient cathedral in Klut Bey in Cairo (19th c.) and in the cathedral in Port Said. Art and iconography of the Oriental Orthodox Churches have been influenced at times by the Byzantine tradition and also by other traditions (post-Renaissance western influence, style sometimes Italian/Catholic).

Where are the icons placed?

Icons are visible in the churches where they are mainly placed on the walls, on a lutrin and also inside the sanctuary and on the altar. The clergy censes the icons during liturgical offices and festivals. In the homes one may see icons as well, but this is very rare for ancient icons on wood which are very precious. Icons on wood are still to be seen in many churches and monasteries all around Egypt, for example in the churches in Old Cairo. In Ethiopia icons on wood are found in some monasteries, usually kept in the so-called treasure house as the ancient ones are precious items which are feared to be stolen. Ancient paintings are found on the wall separating the altar from the nave (that is the iconostasis) in ancient churches, for example in Lake Tana. Ancient wall paintings can also be found. Modern paintings on canvas are put on the iconostasis and on the walls of the churches. In Egypt many icons, ancient and modern, are put in different places around the church, often near the relics of the saint represented on the icon. Icons are put on top of the wall separating the altar from the naves. Ancient icons as well as ancient manuscripts with illuminations of the Ethiopian and Coptic traditions are visible in museums in Ethiopia and in Egypt and also around the

world. The faithful own reproductions of icons, mainly printed on paper as this is the most economical way to buy them.

Vows made in front of the icons/miraculous icons

Through the intermediary of the icons of saints, God can operate healings. Thus, in front of icons, the faithful make prayers and sometimes also vows, especially if the icon is known to be “miraculous”.¹² For example, in front of certain icons, some women come and pray in order to have a child. Through the prayer of intercession of those represented, certain icons allow miracles. In Ethiopia, miraculous icons are carried in procession outside the church, for example at the time of scourges such as drought or epidemics, such as plague in the old days.

Where miraculous icons are found, pilgrimages are organized. In Egypt, south of Louxor, in the Monastery of Saint Georges, is found a miraculous icon of this saint which is deeply venerated. There is an important pilgrimage lasting one week which precedes the feast of Saint George, on 16 November. In Ethiopia, Diana Spencer has named some monasteries with such miraculous icons venerated by the faithful which are censed by the priest and venerated by the faithful especially on certain feast days. In the Monastery of Tädbabä Maryam (Säynt) the icon called “the picture which saves” (*se’el adhen*) is then enveloped in some silk material and brought out of the church for the procession. Women not having children come in front of it to lose their sterility (Spencer 1972: 71f.; 82). In the Monastery of Däbrä Jämädo Maryam (Lasta) a similar icon of the Virgin and Christ said of Saint Luke was taken out of the sanctuary for the public veneration for the festivals of Ledäta Maryam, Genbot Maryam and of Saint Bartholomew, and in case of calamity (Spencer 1972: 83f.). In the church of the Virgin of Däbrä Sahay of Qusquwam, where Queen Walatta Giorgis (Mentewab) resided, one could see the queen painted as a donor under the Virgin “looking for refuge in the salutary picture and recommending to the Virgin her

¹² We still know examples of miraculous icons nowadays in the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

son King Iasu". The queen used to order to have an oil lamp lit day and night in front of the icon (*Annales...*106 Chojnacki 1983:241). We know that under emperor Zar'a Ya'qob (15th c.) faithful were prostrating in front of the icons of the Virgin and icons were censed during the reading of her *Miracles* in the church every Sunday and her thirty two annual festivals (Heldman 1988: 131-142; fig.8).

Did the Oriental Orthodox Churches participate in the iconoclast Byzantine quarrel?

Now comes the question: did the Oriental Orthodox Churches participate in the iconoclast Byzantine quarrel? According to Sirarpie Der Nersessian (d. 1989), a great specialist of Armenian and Byzantine art, the Council of Nicea II would have considered certain so-called "monophysites" such as Severus of Antioch and Philoxenos of Mabbug as being adversaries of pictures, but we have no direct testimony to justify this (Nersessian 1973: 381, 401).¹³ The Syrian Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo, Yohanna Ibrahim, wrote that the Syrian Orthodox never participated in the Byzantine iconoclast quarrel and that they are not responsible for its inception (Ibrahim 1980). The same can be said of the Copts and of the Ethiopians. In fact they were far from Constantinople, the centre of the iconoclastic disputes, especially in Ethiopia.

Practice of the veneration of icons/Veneration not adoration of icons

In front of icons, the Oriental Orthodox faithful light candles; they touch and kiss the icons; they pray in front of the icons, standing or kneeling. They even prostrate themselves in front of icons, especially if they are associated with miracles.

During the great festivals (Palm Sunday, Easter etc.), processions are made inside and outside the churches with the icon of the feast. The faithful pray and sing in front of the icons; the priests offer incense to

¹³ However, according to Sebastian Brock, the great specialist of Syriac studies, Philoxenos has not expressed iconoclastic opinions, see (Brock 1977: 54).

the icons during certain offices. The Coptic faithful, and other Oriental Orthodox, keep small pictures of Christ, the Virgin or a saint in their purses, their bags or on the windows of their cars, as a kind of protection.

One must venerate icons, not adore them. Here are some examples given by the texts. In the Coptic tradition, Abu al Barakat (d. 1324) writes that people prostrate themselves in front of icons, but never adore them. In the Ethiopian tradition, under King Susneyos (17th c.) lived a holy nun, Walatta Petros. In the church of Saint Fasiladas in Meselie, she spent all her nights until dawn standing in front of the icon of the Virgin, straight as a column and without leaning on the wall or the pilasters; and she prayed and supplicated for the salvation of her soul and of all, without rest... Another time, being very sick, she made a prayer in front of the icon of the Virgin asking for her intercession and the picture spoke to her (Ricci 1970). George of Sagla shed tears in front of the icon of the Virgin in the Monastery of Saint Estifanos at Lake Hayq; while prostrating and fasting he saw his prayer being granted (Colin 1987). In the Acts of the holy monk Za Yohannes (middle of the 14th c.) the founder of the monastery of Kebran in Lake Tana, it is said that his parents prostrated themselves in front of the icon of the Virgin to have a child. Being adult, Yohanes prayed in a countryside church dedicated to the Virgin; from her icon she addressed him and told him to become a monk in the Monastery of Debre Libanos.

Icons/pictures and spirituality/ and function or role of icons

All these pictures/icons play the same role as in the Byzantine world. For example: as protection; to think of winning Heaven; to be ocular testimonies of Christ's life; to get closer to God; to remember represented models of saints and to ask for their intercession with God.

Icons/pictures are used and censed by the priest during the liturgy and some offices and during festal processions.

For those who cannot read, pictures and paintings allow those who see them to receive religious education by communicating to the

faithful the teachings of Christ, Church history, the Acts of the Apostles, the lives of the saints, the Holy Bible, as in a book of pictures. Pictures have inestimable value for Christian education, above all for that of children. A religious painting can guide the believer towards spiritual life and salvation, towards the Invisible. The aim is above all pedagogical and spiritual: to instruct those who cannot read to remain firm in faith, to sacrifice themselves if necessary. The pictures of saints, and especially of martyrs, are models of giving oneself to God. They help to encourage and strengthen the faithful, above all the tepid ones. Their representation incites one to meditation, to communion with the saints, in the hope of divine reward. This is why the Oriental Orthodox faithful wish to look at icons, because, through these “windows”, they contemplate the World which is behind time and space, as wrote the Coptic Father Tadros Malaty (Malay 1994: 286). For Matta al Maskin, the aim is “to touch the faith of the faithful in order to help them to pray”. For Pope Shenouda III, it is the didactic impact which is important: “A icon can produce an effect deeper on the soul than a reading or a sermon” (Pope Shenouda 1998: 174).

The aim expressed by the Coptic prayer of consecration is the following: by praying in front of the picture, the faithful ask for their salvation and forgiveness from God. It is the example of repentance and conversion given by Mary the Egyptian who prayed in front of the icon of the Mother of God before being able to enter the church of the Holy Sepulcher. For her, the icon played a role of “comfort”, in order to obtain “grace and kindness from God, the Friend of humankind”, as it is written in the Coptic Orthodox Synaxary.

The prayer to consecrate/bless the icons

Before venerating the icons, lighting candles and prostrating in front of them, they are consecrated by a bishop with holy oil (*myron*), except in the Syrian Orthodox Church which uses simple holy oil

instead of *myron*. The prayers used are found in the books of the prayers of consecration of the bishops.¹⁴

These texts of prayers are another proof of the existence and of the veneration of icons and images in the Oriental Orthodox Churches. In fact, such prayers for consecrating/blessing the icons would not exist if there were no icon or wall painting to be blessed!

Theology of icon

Cyril of Alexandria suggested the idea according to which the icon allows the hypostasis of the Word to become visible, a formula which will be developed by Saint Theodore Studite.¹⁵ In the Coptic Church, in the Middle Ages, according to Severus ibn al-Muqaffa, bishop of Achmounein in the 10th century, adoration is due to God alone.¹⁶ According to Abu al Barakat (d. 1324), we can represent Christ, because, through His Incarnation “He put us in the obligation to represent Him according to the aspects in which He appeared”; and “the picture of Christ is made after the model of His Humanity, not of His Divinity”. Bishop Yousab (18th c.) summarizes everything by writing that “the representation of Christ on an icon and its use in the rite of the veneration are the normal result of the divine Incarnation”.¹⁷ In the Coptic tradition, in the 20th century, Father Tadros Malaty in his book *The Church House of God* wrote two chapters about the iconostasis and the icons. He is not afraid to quote Saint John Damascene and his famous formula: “One must not adore the creature more than the Creator.” He also writes that Christianity is founded on the revelation of God through His Incarnate Son (John 1:18): thus, through this Incarnation, the icon of

¹⁴ See (Chaillot, Belopopsky 1998: 88-102). The Coptic Prayer was translated into English in (Malaty 1994: 298-304). The Ethiopian prayer according to a Geez text was translated into English for me by the late Father Seife Selassie in Addis Ababa.

¹⁵ Quoted by Christoph Schönborn (1976: 98). “L’icône laisse transparaître l’hypostase du Christ”.

¹⁶ See the chapter “Icônes et raisons qui les rendent nécessaires dans l’Eglise” in (Schönborn 1976).

¹⁷ Quoted by Malaty (1994: 272).

God has been revealed to us (John 14: 8, 9). The physical appearance of God on earth makes possible the fact of representing His Image and in order to expose the events of His life in the form of icons. In regards to this topic, as Father Malaty remarks, Saint John Damascene says that when the Invisible has become Visible in His Flesh, we can represent his Baptism, his Transfiguration, etc... and also His miracles which prove His divinity. Father Malaty also writes that the iconoclasts not only were opposed to the ritual veneration of pictures, but that certain Church Fathers considered that they despised the Divine Incarnation as well, because anyone who despises the icon of the Lord also despises His Incarnation. He also insists on the fact that icons represent a vital part of the Tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church which was developed throughout the centuries: the Coptic icons reveal the dogmas and the spirituality of the Coptic Church (Malaty 1994: 225-420). Finally, according to Pope Shenuda (d. 2012), all pictures are not icons, as only icons give at the same time a dogmatic teaching. In front of each icon of Christ, we must remember his divinity and his humanity, as in fact the two are never separated.¹⁸

Conclusion

It is enough to see the faithful of the Oriental Orthodox Churches praying in front of icons to understand that they venerate them greatly. By studying texts of the prayers of consecration of icons, we can also find arguments concerning the theological and Christological significance of pictures in the traditions of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Too often we still hear that the Oriental Orthodox Churches are “monophysites”, which they refute categorically.¹⁹ For the Oriental Orthodox the icon of Christ is a Christological argument, and not a theological obstacle, because it is the proof of the visibility and the real humanity of God the Savior.

¹⁸ Interview with Pope Shenuda in the WCC in Geneva in August 1992.

¹⁹ See the official Christological texts of the Dialogue between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox and also quotations by Pope Shenouda III from *The Nature of Christ* as well as Statements issued by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, all quoted in (Chaillot 2016: 437; 440; 449; 463; 494-6).

According to Leonid Ouspensky, iconology is like a summit of Christological reflexion, because the two are intrinsically linked in function of the theology of Christ's Incarnation(Ouspensky 1982: 23). In fact, if the non Chalcedonian Churches had really been monophysites, if they believed like the heretic Eutyches that the Humanity of Christ had been absorbed by His Divinity, would they have bothered to represent His Humanity on icons and other pictures/paintings? It is this Christological demonstration which pushed me in 1993 to write on the topic of iconography in the Oriental Orthodox Churches and of their veneration of icons.

Icons have clearly developed a spirituality and also Orthodox faith in the Oriental Orthodox Churches. I hope that those who are closed and negative towards this dialogue between these two families of Churches can read the type of quotations I have given in this article, in order to be convinced of the Orthodoxy of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, at least at the iconographical level. Here I have been able to give only very few examples in order to raise interest in this topic. More examples are to be found in my book *Rôle des images et vénération des icons*. Some people should continue to study and write articles and books on the topic of the veneration of icons in the Oriental Orthodox Churches, including from texts in original languages which are not yet translated. Some should also study in depth the texts of the prayers of consecration of the icons.

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