

UCLA

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

The Icon of God and the Mirror of the Soul: Exploring the Origins of Iconography in Patristic Writing

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2mh741hs>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 31(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

Author

Andreopoulos, Andreas

Publication Date

2000-10-01

Peer reviewed

**THE ICON OF GOD AND THE MIRROR OF THE SOUL:
EXPLORING THE ORIGINS OF ICONOGRAPHY
IN PATRISTIC WRITING**

by Andreas Andreopoulos

The icon is also a mirror, fashioned according
to the limitations of our physical nature.

John of Damascus, *Second Apology* 5

Several analyses of Byzantine art have described an unusual iconographic feature: Quite frequently, icons seem to adhere to a perspective that can be understood despite our post-medieval conditioning of direct, naturalist perspective, if we assume that the view presented does not correspond to a gaze directed towards the surface of the image from a fixed, assumed distance, but to a gaze coming from a place behind the center of the image itself. This phenomenon, known as inverted perspective, is largely responsible for the unworldly appearance of Byzantine icons. Inverted perspective represents space as a distortive mirror that is somehow turned inwards.¹

In this paper I would like to explore the significance of the concept of the mirror in early Christian thought as a major factor that shaped iconography through inverted perspective and the implied concept of the icon as a mirror of the soul, something quite consistent with one of the main functions of an icon, to facilitate prayer. Of course, as it is widely known, the concept of the mirror was extended in the late Middle Ages to a literary genre of introspection, “the multitudinous mirrors in which people of the Middle Ages liked to gaze at themselves and other folk—mirrors of history and doctrine and morals, mirrors of princes and lovers and fools.”² The medieval *speculum* was a genre that covered many different works, from the famous *Mirrors* (of nature, knowledge, history and morality) of Vincent of Beauvais, the great encyclopedist of the thirteenth century, to pastoral manuals such as the English *Speculum Huius Vitae*, to a number of different profane works such as the *Mirror of Good Manners* and Gascoigne’s *Steele Glas* and

¹A detailed semiotic analysis of the inverted perspective and a discussion of the mirror effect in iconography can be found in Boris Uspensky’s *The Semiotics of the Ancient Icon* (Lisse 1976). Also cf. Stamatis Skliris’s *En Esopiro* (Athens 1992).

²E. K. Rand, Editor’s Preface, *Speculum* 1.1 (1926) 3–4.

Glasse of Government.³ The focus of this paper, however, will be limited to the concept of the mirror as it may be connected to the development of iconography. For this task, in addition to the exploration of the significance of the mirror in early Christian writings, the psychoanalytical view of an icon or a picture as an object closely related to the mirror stage of developmental psychology will prove to be helpful.

Jacques Lacan, drawing material from Freudian psychology, describes the mirror stage of the psychological development of the child, between the sixth and the eighteenth month.⁴ This stage takes place before the Oedipal complex, and, in some ways, underlies it. What happens during the mirror stage is a gradual identification of the child with his image on the mirror, as he is held by his mother or even standing on his own, the conclusion of which is the establishment of a “relation between the organism and its reality, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*.”⁵ The identification of the self in the mirror stage occurs within a Gestalt encompassing the image of the child’s own body and his surroundings. The duality between the child’s sensory perception and its identification with the image on the mirror however, produces what Lacan calls the imaginary, which creates an environment for any future relation to any *other* (with a small o), or any object. This environment quickly assumes a symbolic nature, and an ideal ego is formed; any *other* can represent the original experience of identification of *other* only metonymically; and thus ego and other are subjected to an even deeper sense of otherness, denoted by Other (with a capital letter) in Lacan’s writings.⁶ This absolute Other is always elusive because its nature is always unconscious, it is *the* unconscious. The Oedipal stage begins at this moment, or even during the mirror stage itself, when the mother holds the child in front of the mirror and is recognized by him.⁷ The child can now be conscious of the presence or absence of the mother. Interestingly enough, especially for the psychology of religion, Melanie Klein’s account places at more or less the same time the

³Cf. Ritamary Bradley, “Backgrounds of the Title *Speculum* in Mediaeval Literature,” *Speculum* 29 (1954) 100–115.

⁴Jacques Lacan: *Écrits, a Selection* (New York 1977) 1–7.

⁵Lacan (n. 4 above) 4.

⁶Lacan (n. 4 above) 55–56, 139–140, 304–305.

⁷One would have to bear in mind that the gender specific language stems from the male perspective in Freudian studies. Although the mirror stage itself is common to males and females, the subsequent Oedipal/Electra stage is manifested in different ways in the two genders. Unfortunately, to employ gender neutral language at this point would be too risky.

recognition of an object as good or bad, starting from the very fact of presence/satisfaction of oral pleasure or absence/negation of this pleasure (the good and the bad breast).

How is the psychoanalytic discourse on the mirror stage relevant to iconography? This kind of painting resonates with parts of the psyche that reach down to our primordial or most basic understanding of the world and our relationship with it. Some neo-Freudians,⁸ such as Georges Bataille,⁹ have traced the birth of the opposition between good and bad and, therefore, the birth of the religious instinct, to the basic satisfaction of the instincts of hunger and possession. The examination of the icon as a religious object however, seems to take us to even more primal stages of the development of the self. The recognition of otherness, and the subsequent expulsion of the Other into the unconscious, signify the acceptance and the memory of a loss of unity between the self and the others that has its theo-mythological analogue in the expulsion from Paradise and the loss of direct communion with God. In fact, this memory and the desire to return to God transcends gender differentiation, which occurs only at the subsequent Oedipal stage, and therefore has to be considered as an earlier and more basic part of human psychogenesis. The icon appears as a mirror hiding the Other behind it, who can see us but cannot be seen. One immediately thinks of the famous passage from the first epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians: “We now see enigmatically through a mirror” (βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι’ ἐσόπτρου ἐν ἀινίγματι).¹⁰

The image and metaphor of the mirror can be identified as one of the most interesting ways Neoplatonist philosophy has used to describe the relation between God and the human being. One of the earliest references on the significance of the mirror can be found in an Orphic story¹¹ where the mirror was one of the toys used by the Titans to lure Dionysus as a child, and then tear him to pieces and eat him. After that, Zeus destroyed them with his thunderbolts and men were made out of

⁸Freud himself in his works *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* explains away the religious instinct as the inherited memory of the members of the primordial community who rebelled against the rule of a dominating father, overthrew him and consumed his body. After a series of social reorganizations, the memory of the father returned as the memory of the Father God, who reminded the members of the tribe of their lost unity.

⁹George Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (New York 1973).

¹⁰1 Cor. 13.12.

¹¹The relevant passages are collected in O. Kern, *Orphicum Fragmenta* (Berlin 1963) 209.

their ashes. Humans, therefore, contain a Titanic, earthy element, as well as a divine Dionysiac, which can be released by purification. The story is alluded to by Plotinus, who takes the mirror as a symbol of the attractiveness of the material world and, thus, as the symbol of the soul's descent into it; but later Neoplatonists worked out an elaborate allegorical interpretation, where the division of Dionysus by the Titans corresponds to the division of the divine power in the material world.¹²

Plato discusses the mirror in an appendix to the *Timaeus*.¹³ According to him, what happens when we see an image in a mirror is that the light from the eye meets the light from the reflected object seen on the surface of the mirror and these two sets of light form the perceived image on the surface of the mirror. In that sense the reflection is as real as any object, not a visual illusion, and it owes its existence to the prototype and the light of the sun.

The recognition of the reflected object as a real object is quite important in Christian writers, who picked up this concept from Plato. Saint Athanasios the Great likens the purified soul to "a mirror in which it can see the image of the Father."¹⁴ Similarly to the orphic myth of the mirror, which suggests purification of the soul, Athanasios says:

So when the soul has put off every stain of sin with which it is tinged, and keeps pure only what is in the image, then when this shines forth it can truly contemplate as in a mirror the Word, the image of the Father, and in him meditate on the Father, of whom the Savior is the image.¹⁵

Saint Gregory of Nyssa used the metaphor of the mirror in a way quite compatible with the meaning that analytical psychology ascribes to the symbol of the mirror. Gazing at the mirror suggests a kind of introspection; the following excerpt describes the purified soul that looks onto itself and recognizes its archetype, the likeness of the divine:

The soul will go back to itself and see clearly what it is in its nature, and through its own beauty it will look upon the archetype as if in a mirror and an image. We can truly say that the accurate likeness of the divine

¹²Comments by A. H. Armstrong in his translation of Plotinus's *Enneads*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA 1984) 6.73.

¹³Plato, *Timaeus* 46 A-C.

¹⁴Athanasios, *Contra Gentes* 8, cited in Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford 1981) 79.

¹⁵Athanasios, *Contra Gentes* 34, cited in Louth (n. 14 above) 79.

consists in our soul's imitation of the superior Nature.¹⁶

The role of the mirror has been undertaken, according to Athanasios's statement, by the Word. Visible to humans, Christ himself is an image of the otherwise invisible Father. As an image he is born from the archetype, the Father. The mirror was created for man to see God, although there is something in the image that reminds man of the archetype of his own self. Man is, after all, fashioned after the image and likeness of God, and in that sense it can be argued that it is man who took the form of Christ and not Christ the form of man when he was born. Yet at the same time man is always under the gaze of God (the all-seeing eye), while Christ is given to humanity as an image to be seen. This metaphor resonates in the capacity of the icon as a double mirror, which, although it submits its surface to our gaze, it assumes the presence of God's gaze from the other side. It is quite striking that the Byzantine and Russian iconographers as late as the nineteenth century used to paint the so-called "Great Eye" on the surface of the unpainted icon and write the word "God" underneath, before they started painting.¹⁷

The premise of the eye of God gazing upon us from the other side of the icon, although subconscious, gives an unprecedented semiotic dimension to religious visual art. During prayer one addresses God as directly as possible, by placing oneself voluntarily under the gaze of God, and in that sense the icon can be seen as an aid to prayer. The viewer is placing himself in front of the symbol of the metaphysical and engages in the only possible (under normal circumstances) contact he may have with it. Prayer, as the most profound form of introspection, is directed towards God through man's deepest and most elusive self. It is not prudent, however, to identify God with the Lacanian Other; that would be to reduce God to the human unconscious. Yet, it is fair to say that the Other corresponds to the primordial condition of man before the Fall, before the differentiation between the secular and the numinous within human consciousness, and that its contemplation includes both the Platonic anamnesis of the undifferentiated condition of Adam, still present in the collective unconscious, as well as the acceptance of divine grace and the wish for transcendence of the Fall.

¹⁶Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. C. P. Roth (Crestwood, NY 1993) 78.

¹⁷Uspensky (n. 1 above) 39.

How are these two different from each other?

We must keep in mind that the icon as a sign is very closely connected to Christology and that the iconoclastic arguments echo strongly the arguments of the Monophysites. The arguments of the Iconoclasts were directed specifically against the representation of Christ, although their practice had a much broader scope and was directed against the representation and the veneration of the relics of saints, as well. One of the main positions of the iconodules was, as expressed by John of Damascus, the acceptance of the “circumscription” of God in the person of Christ. God had become incarnate, assuming all the characteristics of man, without ever losing anything of his divinity. The issue of the representation of God lies at the heart of the significance of the view of Saint Athanasios, who described Christ as the mirror in which the un-circumscribed God can be contemplated. The psychological and religious function of the icon was to maintain an open channel to the numinous world. This was denied in the monophysite views which could not accept the dual nature/energy of Christ and held his humanity to be “a drop of honey dissolved in the sea of his divinity,” as the monophysite view often put it. It was also denied in the iconoclastic views that could not accept that the icon can be understood as, as we would describe in contemporary language, a “metaphor” for the presence of Christ and the saints among us.

The Son is at the same time an icon of the Father, as according to the Johannine gospel “anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,”¹⁸ as well as the archetype of man. The latter can be understood in two different ways that, nevertheless, complement each other. As already mentioned above, Christ was the prototype for man, ontologically speaking. This statement, however, has a psychological counterpart, beyond its theological and historical dimension. Christ can be seen as what C. G. Jung described as a psychological “symbol of the self,”¹⁹ or rather an ideal model of the self, and can thus express and guide man’s strive to actualize the image of God inside him.

Christ, as the second Adam, is a second beginning for humanity. He is, as Adam was when he was created, a pure image of God, of which Tertullian wrote:

And this therefore is to be considered as the image of God in man, that

¹⁸John 14.9.

¹⁹Carl Gustav Jung, *Aion* (Princeton 1969) 36–71.

the human spirit has the same motions and senses as God has, though not in the same way God has them.²⁰

The semiotic identity of Christ is of tremendous importance, because in his person the image of God coincides with the image of man. Patristic texts on the creation of man in the image and likeness of God often touch upon this issue. According to Origen, the image of God in man is an image of an image, “for my soul is not directly the image of God, but is made after the likeness of the former image.”²¹ The Son, in his theology, is the true image of the Father (“the Savior is the figure of the substance or subsistence of God,”²² as well as “what else therefore is the image of God after the likeness of which man was made, but our Savior, who is the first born of every creature?”²³ and “the image of the invisible God is the Savior”²⁴) after whose likeness our inner man is made (“but that which is made after the image and similitude of God is our inner man, invisible, incorporeal, incorrupt and immortal”²⁵). The Godhead in us, says Origen, reveals itself through prudence, justice, moderation, virtue, wisdom, and discipline.²⁶

A different line of thought on the relation of the image and the prototype starts with Plotinus. His central idea of how things came to be is the emanation from a higher source, which in turn is emanated from an even higher source, and so on; everything can be ultimately traced to the *év*, the One, the great Source and Principle. The metaphor of the image is a way to describe the relation between the source and what proceeds from it: the latter is an image of the higher source. At the top of his hierarchy we can see how the concepts of the One, Cosmic Intelligence, and Cosmic Soul are related: Intelligence is an image of the One, and Soul is an image of Intelligence. Each rung in this descending hierarchy is a little *less* than the previous one, of which it is the image. It is important to note that the image proceeds directly from its prototype, and it ultimately seeks to return to the prototype. Their likeness is the connection the image needs to know its archetype, so that by contemplating the archetype the image can return to it. The contemplation

²⁰Tertullian, *Adv. Marcion*. 2.16, PL 2, col. 304.

²¹Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.49, PG 11, col. 1590.

²²Origen, *De Principiis* 1.2.8, PG 11, col. 156.

²³Origen, *In Genesim homilia* 1.13, PG 12, col. 156.

²⁴Origen, *Selecta in Genesim* 9.6, PG 12, col. 107.

²⁵Origen, *In Genesim homilia* 1.13, PG 12, col. 155.

²⁶Origen, *De Principiis* 4.37, PG 11, col. 412.

itself is the act of return.

Nevertheless, Plotinus's understanding of this hierarchy of images is very close to Origen's views. Both writers accept that there are certain orders of images, and that an image of the second order—an image of an image—is not as good or accurate as an image of the first order. Such views are not surprising in Plotinus, who thought of the entire cosmos as a hierarchy derived from the *έν*, and in spite of Origen's Christian background, they are not surprising in his thought either, because his view of the man Jesus as one of the *λογικοί*, and divine only on account of his participation with the Son, *λόγος*, the true image of God the Father, shows something similar to the thought of Plotinus. The image of God is Christ, who does not necessarily have to be taken as a consubstantial image. Image and identity seem to be mutually exclusive, while for later fathers, such as Maximus the Confessor, Christ is at the same time God and the image of God.

A change of this position can be seen in Augustine, or more precisely, in the difference between the early and mature Augustine. Although the early Augustine,²⁷ like Origen and Ambrose, accepted that man was a second-order image of God, later, in *De Trinitate*, he combined the Plotinian idea of an image as something that reflects what created it with the argument that Christ is not a mere image of God, but shares his substance, and concluded that man is the image of God (an image of the first order), as he is the immediate creation of God, with no intermediate rung between them. Nevertheless, the nature of the image relationship in Augustine seems to have been influenced by Plotinus's views of the divine intellectual. For Augustine the image of God has to be located in the rational part of man. A certain analogy he used seemed to confirm his hypothesis: God is trinitarian, and man's rational self is also trinitarian. As Augustine wrote in *De Trinitate*:

And in these three, when the mind knows itself and loves itself, there remains a trinity, mind, love and knowledge; and it is confused by no mingling; although each is singly in itself, and all are wholly in one another, whether one in both or both in one, and so all in all.²⁸

A problem with Augustine's approach, which is also evident in Origen's writings, is the exclusion of the body from the image of God within man, although, in contrast with Greek fathers such as Gregory of

²⁷In works such as *Retractationes*.

²⁸Augustine, *De Trinitate* 9.5.8.

Nyssa, he does accept that the earthy, material body is a true part of the self: "The God-image is within, not in the body. . . . Where the understanding is, where the mind is, where the power of investigating truth is, there God has his image."²⁹ Origen had presented a similar view in *Contra Celsum*: "The image of the Creator is imprinted on the soul, not on the body."³⁰ This obviously corresponds to the rational part of the self, Augustine's *anima rationalis*. When Augustine discussed Christ and the image of God on the other hand, he identified him with the image of God, wishing to stress Christ's divine nature and his consubstantiality with the Father, as opposed to having been created in/after God's image: "The only begotten . . . alone is the image, not after the image."³¹ We have to note here once more that Augustine formulated different views on this issue during his lifetime, depending on whether he felt that the concept of the image compromised the divinity of Christ. In the previous excerpt he expresses an opinion that is in agreement with most Greek fathers.

Two points of psychological interest can be deduced from the above: The first is that the ideal self is situated within man, rather than in a remote and unapproachable world. The struggle towards the Good can therefore also be situated within man. The second is that the image of God is not identified with the entire self, but only with its spiritual part. This view can also have a negative side: if one part of man is made in the image of God, what can we say about the other part? Is there a divine and an anti-divine image within man, fighting against each other? This would directly imply a dualism, since the part of the soul that is excluded from the *anima rationalis* and, therefore, from the image of God, consists of the uncontrolled wishes and desires, which often prevail upon the self. Still, we may be somehow assured that this is not what Augustine had in mind when he spoke of the rational soul, because his writings in other places express a deep personal divine longing, a quite "irrational" passion for God. It would be important to recognize then, that the language of Augustine was different from that of modern philosophy and psychoanalysis, but the supremacy of reason on theological grounds, which echoes similar views in the Neoplatonic tradition, influenced greatly the development of Western thought. Certainly the models of Plotinus and Origen give the intellect a privileged

²⁹ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 48, Sermo 2, PL 36, col. 564.

³⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.49, PG 11, col. 1590.

³¹ Augustine, *Retractationes* 1.26, PL 32, col. 626.

position, which was counteracted by Tertullian's *sacrificium intellectus* on the other extreme. The confession "Credo quia absurdum est" ("I believe because it is absurd") is attributed, probably wrongly, to Tertullian,³² but it reflects more or less his attitude to faith and reason, for he at least wrote: "And the Son of God died, which is immediately credible because it is absurd. And buried he rose again, which is certain because it is impossible."³³ At any rate, eventually reason became the decisive principle. The concept of a separate, wholly and consciously good part would suggest a fragmentation of the self, a predictably unstable condition. The suppression of a part of the self, as opposed to its integration, would lead to a catastrophe, according to Jung's psychological rule according to which "when the individual remains undivided and does not become conscious of his inner opposite, the world must perforce act out the conflict and be torn into opposing halves."³⁴

Nevertheless, what the writings of Augustine and the other fathers indicate is that there is something inside man, wherever this is located and however it is identified, that still preserves the *ανάμνησις* (memory) of the divine image, which can thus be rebuilt. This view is further supported by the contemplation of the *λόγοι*, the "principles in accordance with everything in the cosmos was created through the Word of God, the *λόγος*,"³⁵ according to fathers such as Origen, Evagrius, and, foremost, Maximus the Confessor. If the soul can discern the *λόγοι*, it will be able to "see its own radiance,"³⁶ revert to its natural condition, and, like a crystal mirror, it will reflect the divine image faithfully, clearing the mirror in Saint Paul's metaphor of our contemplation of the Father as the elusive Other. Christ, as the second Adam, the true image of God, expresses the natural condition of man, the mirror made of perfect and unblemished crystal. Surprisingly similar, with the soul likened to a mirror that, under certain circumstances can reflect the divine, is Plotinus's view of the higher part of imagination or *πρώτη φαντασία* (first or primary imagination).

The model of evil as a distortion of the good circumvents the problems posed by the identification of the divine image with the *anima rationalis* in man, discussed above, because evil can be denied separate

³²Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychological Types* (Princeton 1971) 12.

³³Tertullian, *De carne Christi*, 5, cited in Jung (n. 32 above) 12–13.

³⁴Carl Gustav Jung, *Aion* (Princeton 1969) 71.

³⁵Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London 1996) 37.

³⁶Evagrius, *Logos Praktikos* 64. 648, cited in Louth (n. 35 above) 37.

and real existence only if the good cannot exist (in man) separately, either. Evil as the distortion of truth does not constitute a force complementary to the good, in the sense of the opposition/completion of yin and yang, which has to be conquered and suppressed, but as the opaqueness as it were of the soul-mirror, something quite consistent with the doctrine of evil as *privatio boni*.

The metaphor of the mirror is also found in Gregory of Nyssa, but he applies it to human nature as a whole. Free will directs man towards good or evil, which is in turn reflected in him:

When you put gold in front of a mirror, the mirror takes on the appearance of the gold and because of the reflection it shines with the same gleam as the real substance. So too, if it catches the reflection of something loathsome, it imitates this ugliness by means of a likeness, as for example of a frog, a toad, a millipede, or anything else that is disgusting to look at, thus reproducing in its own substance whatever is placed in front of it.³⁷

For Gregory then, the entire man is capable of good and evil, or in other words, the mirror of human nature may reflect good or evil. It is in this context that he sees the likeness of God in man. His view of human nature as a whole is quite high, and he makes sure when he discusses the wisdom of the flesh³⁸ to associate it not with the body given to us by God when man was created in the first place, but with the garments of skin³⁹ given to us during the expulsion from Paradise. Subsequently, if man avoids the wisdom of the flesh, the likeness of God will be restored in him. This model proposes a psychological balance perhaps not found to such a degree in other patristic writings. Gregory's concepts distinguish between matter per se and the material condition, and his thought is closely connected to the Platonic tradition of the image and its "participation" with the prototype. For Gregory, moreover, the "natural" condition of the human mirror is good. This is quite significant in relation to his mirror theory, because it suggests that the mirror of human nature, human nature in its entirety, will eventually turn to good and will reflect only good.

Christ is, according to Maximus the Confessor, who expressed a view most helpful in the contemplation of Christ and iconography, a

³⁷Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, sermon 4, PG 44.832D–833C.

³⁸Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, PG 46.369B–376B.

³⁹Gen. 3.21.

symbol of himself:

He accepted to be unchangeably created in form like us and through His immeasurable love for humankind to become the type and symbol of Himself, and from Himself symbolically to represent Himself, and through the manifestation of Himself to lead to Himself in His complete and secret hiddenness the whole creation, and while He remains quite unknown in His hidden, secret place beyond all things, unable to be known or understood by any being in any way whatever, out of His love for humankind he grants to human beings intimations of Himself in the manifest divine works performed in the flesh.⁴⁰

Christ is something of a semiotic paradox: being the image and therefore the symbol of the one eternal God, he is at the same time God himself. His image is a *mysterium coniunctionis*, uniting the “circumscribed” and the “uncircumscribable,” to use the language of the iconoclastic controversy. The word “symbol” here denotes, like in “Σύμβολον της Πιστεως” (lit. “symbol of the faith,” or “creed”), a truth that cannot be fully understood or articulated, and can thus be expressed only through a symbol. As Ysabel de Andia reminds us, “Το σύμβολον, in Greek, means a sign or token by which one knows or infers something. Originally σύμβολα (or *tesseræ hospitales*, in Latin) were the halves or corresponding pieces of a bone or a coin, which two contracting parties broke between them, each keeping one.”⁴¹ A symbol then, expresses a broken unity and the promise of a reunification. The parts take their significance from each other, and the contract they signify must some day be fulfilled.

De Andia writes later in the same article, “the symbol has always a reference to a missing part, which can be material or intellectual: the absence of a person or of a world, but also presence of another world behind or above the one which we perceive, like the visible behind the invisible and the intelligible behind the sensible.” Christ, as a symbol of himself according to Maximus, is at the same time the fulfillment of the contract the word symbol denotes. He is no ordinary symbol, because unlike the “absence of a world” ordinary symbols refer to, he embodies the presence of both worlds. Moreover, as the second Adam he is the symbol of the future of man, his eschatological fulfillment. In the person of Christ the unknowable God and the know-

⁴⁰Maximus the Confessor, *Difficulty* 10, 31c, in Louth (n. 35 above) 132.

⁴¹Ysabel de Andia, “Symbol and Mystery,” unpublished paper.

able human are united in a way that cannot be accounted for from within the Jewish tradition, which held that “nobody can see God’s face and live.”⁴² He is, for that reason, a scandal for the Jewish understanding of the image of God. As God-on-earth, however, he chose to be born in the Jewish culture and to bring into completion the issues and the questions inherent in it. The Incarnation is, among other things, a semiotic event that legitimated the representation of God and the paradoxical transcendence of his hiddenness, but as such an event it could be meaningful only following after the Jewish concept of the uncircumscribable God. It would not constitute a semiotic paradox in pagan cultures, where gods were routinely represented anthropomorphically or theriomorphically. Christ could only be seen as the fulfillment of the symbol if the absence of the “other” and the need for the symbolic were understood. Interestingly enough, Saint Paul noted the significance of the “Unknown God” of Athens as a God that could now be revealed to the world by an act of grace. The “Unknown God” was an empty sign, perhaps the closest to the biblical formless God who cannot be represented in carved (and painted) images. This represents an entry point that draws our attention to the importance of the elusiveness of the Other in Lacanian analysis. The revelation in the person of Christ and the Incarnation can be effective only inasmuch it reaches the unconscious and even beyond, and makes knowable what was always central in the psychological and spiritual life of a culture but had always remained unknowable. The paradox of the image of Christ seems to be, at any rate, one of the reasons that led to the iconoclastic controversy. Many religious cultures faced similar issues that resulted either in an iconoclastic denial of images altogether, or in a confirmation of the importance and the significance of the image and its veneration as a religious practice.

The unique significance of the Christian icon is the presence of God among humans, manifested in the incarnation and the divine Passion, which transforms the icon into a field of a double movement from both sides of the mirror: the divine *Other* has made itself visible and circumscribable. This can be seen as a first step towards the final divine apocalypse: a face has appeared on the surface of the mirror, although it is still “enigmatic,” being the premonition and the promise of the time when the image will be clear and the communication will be direct,

⁴²Exod. 33.20.

“face to face.” The icon, therefore, is closely interrelated with Christian eschatology. But this should not be a surprise. Visual discourse is and has been as important as textual discourse in the tradition of the church, especially for the East. Iconography stands in the middle of Christian theology, and many of the central mysteries of the faith can be approached through it.

Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies
59 Queen’s Park Crescent East
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2C4