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DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

DOCTORAL FIELD: THEOLOGY

IMAGE AND TYPOLOGY OF HUMAN REPRESENTATION AS A MEDIUM OF CONVERSION
(ABSTRACT)

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CONTENT

This paper analyzes the process of religious conversion, focusing on two dimensions: the transition from one religious faith to another and the second is metanoia. Conversion is generally understood as accepting a new set of religious beliefs involving attending a different place of worship. This paper examines conversion from the perspective of metanoia, an essential aspect for some individuals for whom religion is more than a mere rationalization, a social convention, or a set of norms. For those for whom religion is a matter of deep faith, the conversion process can generate significant ethical and emotional challenges that influence their whole personality. Conversion, in such cases, represents a profound change, affecting intellectual, emotional, and social life. Often, it may even involve a break with professional or social life, requiring radical economic and social adjustments. In other words, a genuine conversion can trigger a period of intense inner turmoil, suffering, and significant emotional upheavals, affecting the whole psychic structure of the individual.

The study of conversion as metanoia, the mechanisms involved, and the motives that lead people to adopt a new faith are essential concerns for researchers in various fields. Interest in this phenomenon is justified from several perspectives. Firstly, from the perspective of the inner search of the individual who joins a new religious movement, and secondly, from the pressure exerted by the media, which, through visual means, promotes conversion in specific religious contexts. These aspects are drawing the attention of theologians, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and even artists in an attempt to understand the truth behind these conversions. Another critical factor is the secularization of the contemporary society, which leads to an intense search for a tangible and visible divinity. In this context, young people often abandon traditional faith without a clear explanation.

1.   Keywords:

Conversion, metanoia, sacred image, symbol, anthropology, iconography, iconography, missionary work, Byzantine art.

2.   Argument

Over time, several papers have been written on the image as a medium of conversion. In this field of missionary theology, both Romanian and foreign theologians have realized scientific research of missiological studies on conversion. In the scientific research of Missiology on religious conversion, we have analyzed the perspective of conversion as metanoia from the anthropological, psychological, or sociological point of view, combined with

aspects of morality and Christian vocation. Summarizing the above, we can say that, in its general lines, the field of the missiology of conversion as metanoia from the iconic point of view has been a real temptation for researchers. In this context, we need a thematic study to elaborate a monography that approaches this theme from several perspectives: symbolic-dogmatic, historical, anthropological, aesthetic, and artistic. Drawing up such a monography means going beyond the common perimeter and banal repetition.

I chose this topic for my doctoral thesis because I wanted to conduct an in-depth study. My main objective was to present the iconic as metanoia from the perspective of the image translated into missiology from the perspective of the theology of the icon, revealing, at the same time, the relationship between iconology, missiology, and pneumatology, as well as their spiritual-anthropological implications.

3.   Topic difficulty

As mentioned above, the number of works, studies, and articles dealing with the iconic aspect of conversion, such as metanoia through religious images in Romanian and other languages, is minimal. These works explore the importance of the beauty of the theology of the icon in the context of the Holy Scripture and its impact in missiology. As a result, it has been necessary to research and translate studies, articles, and works written in foreign languages, as well as to consult bibliographical references that address both the scriptural foundations of the theology of the icon and conversion as metanoia, as well as historical, canonical, dogmatic and artistic-plastic aspects. This bibliography in foreign languages includes 90 works, studies, and articles, ten online sources in foreign languages, and 95 titles in Romanian. In the present work, we have conducted extensive research on the iconic content in the context of conversion as metanoia from the missiological, anthropological, psychological, sociological, dogmatic, aesthetic, and artistic perspectives of the icon.

4.   Originality of the research

The originality of this theme lies in the detailed approach to the iconic aspect as an element of religious conversion as metanoia and in the identification of image and symbol as critical elements in determining sacredness and the sacred. This approach is based on a missiological, anthropological, psychological, sociological, and artistic analysis. A distinctive feature of the originality of this work is that it conducts extensive research on the iconic content in the context of religious conversion as metanoia, addressing several perspectives, such as the

missiological, anthropological, psychological, and artistic perspectives. This research is based on 90 bibliographical references in foreign languages, 10 online sources in foreign languages, and 95 in Romanian.

5.   Topicality of the present study

From a spiritual point of view, it is essential to note that a conversion such as metanoia involves both an individual psychological experience and a religious one. A necessary factor in religious conversion is the image, which has a visual impact that stimulates the inner search for compatibility with a particular religious cult. This process involves multiple psychological and ethical aspects, and spiritual leadership can help facilitate and enhance the conversion process.

In a contemporary secularized society with a spiritual vacuum, the importance of icons in the Orthodox Christian faith and the process of conversion is noticeable. Hagiographic icons, beautifully ornamented, are described as windows that open to offer the onlooker a glimpse of the divine. They are used both in the church, as an integral part of the expression of faith, and in the private space of the homes of believers. For the faithful Orthodox Christian, the icon is a form of prayer and a means of drawing closer to the divinity. Typically, icons depict scenes from the life of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or the Holy Scriptures, as well as images of saints.

6.   The importance of the heuristic approach

Through this paper, we aim to address the iconic aspect of religious conversion and emphasize that metanoia is an individual-level psychological and religious experience. A fundamental element in the process of metanoia is the image, which has the role of creating a psychological impact and awakening the individual's inner search to find the religious faith that best suits him. There are undoubtedly multiple psychological and ethical implications associated with this process. In addition, we wish to highlight the differences in the use of images in religious conversion in various contexts and ways that are influenced by the religious content they present. The sacredness of an image varies from one religion to another and has a distinct symbolic meaning within the symbolic-dogmatic aspect.

7.   Aim of the scientific approach

Through the scholarly research we will undertake, we aim to produce a well-founded work that will bring to the forefront the authentic teaching on the iconic aspect of conversion as metanoia, emphasizing the influence of the image as a determining element. This work will

be shaped on the basis of rigorous scientific documentation, highlighting the differences from the icon's missiological, anthropological, psychological, sociological, dogmatic, aesthetic, and artistic perspectives.

8.   Methodology used

We used several methods to carry out this work, including documentation, bibliographic research, and analysis. We collected bibliographical materials from libraries and then we thematically systematized the obtained information. We used the chronological method to highlight the iconic typologies in the conversion process, such as metanoia.

We also resorted to the quantitative method, collecting an extensive range of bibliographical materials in Romanian and diverse foreign languages that directly or indirectly address the iconic religious conversion theme. This method is closely related to the comparative method, through which we checked the quality of the selected information. In the scientific research on this topic, we used the deductive method, through which we formulated hypotheses, obtained and selected information, and deduced new elements.

9.   Stages of the research process

This thesis has been structured into three chapters to realize a coherent theological approach: 1. Universal dimensions of religious conversion; 2. Image and symbol as defining elements of religious conversion; 3. The icon and its missionary work – The metanoia ff Byzantine art.

In the process of writing this doctoral thesis, I went through the following stages of work:

- **Analysis of selective bibliography**

In the first stage, we analyzed the relevant bibliography in the field to identify as many bibliographical references as possible related to the topic. These bibliographical sources were examined and compiled reading sheets to better understand their content and their contribution to my research.

- **Content definition**

In the second stage, based on the collected bibliographical material, we developed a detailed table of content that included all relevant aspects of the chosen topic. This table of content was designed to adequately cover all aspects of research and debate present in the thesis.

- **Development of a bibliography based on the table of content**

As we progressed in the research process and discovered new relevant issues, it was necessary to identify, procure, and study additional bibliographical material. This stage consisted of expanding and enriching the initial bibliography to provide a solid foundation to support the arguments and analysis presented in the thesis.

10.   General framework of the works

The present paper is organized into three chapters, each of them with several sub-chapters. I have included an introduction in which I detailed technical aspects related to the elaboration of the paper. In the introduction, I addressed the following factors: the argument, the difficulty of the chosen topic, the originality, the topicality, the significance of the study, the research questions, the importance of the research, the research methods, their stages, and the structure of the paper.

The paper's first chapter entitled "Universal dimensions of religious conversion", focuses on the theological premises underlying religious conversion. This chapter is divided into the following sub-chapters: Theoretical aspects of religious conversion, Motivations and arguments underlying conversion, Conversion as a human process, Essential motivations in the process of religious conversion, Conversion as a bridge between religions, Honesty of faith and its role in the conversion process, Psychological aspects of the notion of conversion, Mind control and conversion of faith and the Chapter conclusions.

In these subchapters, we have presented and described the importance of metanoia as both an individual psychological and a common religious experience. We have emphasized the critical role of imagery in the conversion process, as it is responsible for generating a psychological impact and awakening the inner search in the individual to find the religious cult that best suits him. We also emphasized other psychological and ethical implications in this process. Religious leadership can facilitate and complement the conversion process by accepting psychological and moral perspectives. Despite some situations where groups may exhibit manipulation and deception in their self-presentation, there is generally a selective affinity between the group and the individuals recruited that initiates a process of interaction in which certain types of individuals and certain types of groups together create a distinct religious environment. The group can strongly influence the devotee and may be a necessary but insufficient condition for transforming the individual into a new identity. At the same time, devotees also influence the evolution of groups, particularly when a group attracts unstable individuals or when participants' orientations involve an expectation of a strong and charismatic

leader.

The second chapter is of particular importance and it is called "Image and symbol as defining elements of religious conversion". In it, there are have presented the theological premises of religious conversion's iconic, symbolic, and anthropological aspects. The second chapter consists of the following subchapters: Iconic and anthropological aspects of conversion, The religious image and the religious symbol, Other imagistic expressions of the sacred, The role of the sacred image in the non-Christian world, Sacred interpretations of the human image – other than the Christian icon, A distinctive interpretation of the sacred image, The representation of the human image through art, The role and importance of the image in Orthodoxy, The representation of God, The vision of God in Augustinian thinking, Karl Barth, Augustinian thinking and the modern image of the sacred, The image of the sacred in Western Christian thinking, Chapter conclusions.

In these subchapters, we have presented and described that conversion has significant implications for anthropologists, theologians, and religious believers. In many religious traditions, conversion marks a moment when divine intervention is most evident. Symbolism is at the intersection of culture, art, and language, and religious symbolism is at the confluence of two worlds: the human and the divine. Knowledge, even to some extent, of religious symbols serves as a guide in this area of human expression and facilitates intercultural understanding. Conversion as metanoia is both an individual psychological and a religious experience. A fundamental element in religious conversion is the image, which generates a psychological impact. The image awakens in the individual the inner search. In addition, there are many other psychological and ethical implications and religious leadership can facilitate the conversion process by making it easier and more complete.

Conversion as metanoia through images occurs in various contexts and ways and is influenced by the religious content they present. The sacredness of an image differs from one religion to another and has a distinct symbolic meaning. For example, in many religions, the spirit cannot be represented visually; it does not have a face, and their places of worship do not include icons, calling themselves houses of prayer. In Christianity, the icon has a profound significance, representing the mystery, as we receive God in his totality and ensure that we not just attribute an energetic form to Him but always strive towards a spiritual form. The reality present in an icon is realized in two ways: the icon has a spiritual aspect and an energetic aspect, but because of our weak faith, we only see the energetic aspect of the icon.

The third chapter of the work, "The icon and its missionary work – the metanoia of Byzantine art" presents the icon role which plays a vital role in the Orthodox Christian faith

and conversion. This chapter consists of the following sub-chapters: Origins of Byzantine art, Characteristics of Byzantine art, Canons and Ermines, Icon as a symbol and plastic expression of two worlds, Particularity of sight and gaze in the icon, Theological foundations in Byzantine art, Dogmatic foundations of the icon in the theology of St. John Damascene, Iconic image as a means of revealing the divine mystery and the Chapter conclusions. In these subchapters, we have addressed the essential role that icons play in the Orthodox Christian faith, as well as the conversion process. Hagiographic icons, beautifully ornamented, are described as windows to the Kingdom of God. They are used inside churches, as an integral part of the expression of faith, and in the private environment of people's homes. For the Orthodox believer, the icon is a form of prayer and a means of drawing closer to God.

Icons are an integral part of the tradition of the Orthodox Church, from its foundation to the present day, and are perhaps the most characteristic feature of our churches. In the early years of the expansion of Christianity, depictions of saints, their stories, and the figures of Jesus and the Virgin Mary were minimal, especially in murals, because of the imminent persecution. The figures and scenes depicted in icons and murals were based on oral information passed down from generation to generation among believers, while the first icon is attributed to the evangelist Luke and depicts the Virgin Mary.

The recognition of Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great marked the beginning of the public use of icons in the church, which had previously been restricted to private use. In the Byzantine Empire, during the 8th century and the first half of the 9th century, icons became the subject of intense theological and political disputes, which generated unrest and tensions. These controversies split the believers into those who supported and venerated icons and those who opposed their use.

11. Conclusions

The process of conversion as metanoia is a complex experience involving individual psychological and religious aspects. An essential element in metanoia is the image, which has significant visual importance in generating a psychological impact and stimulates the individual's inner search for religion. This perspective has numerous psychological and ethical implications. By accepting and integrating the psychological and ethical perspectives, religious leadership can facilitate metanoia, contributing to a smoother and more complete experience.

Although there are situations where certain groups may resort to manipulation and misrepresentation, in general, there is a certain elective affinity between the group and the

individual being recruited, which initiates a process of interaction where certain types of individuals and certain types of groups work together to create a religious environment. The group can exert a powerful influence on the individual's commitment and may play a necessary, but insufficient role in transforming the individual into a new identity. However, religious devotees also influence the evolution of groups, especially when a group attracts unstable individuals or when the participants' orientations involve the expectation of a strong and charismatic leader.

According to Jean-Luc Blaquard's perspective, the process of conversion as metanoia implies the possibility for each individual to choose the religious faith into which he or she wishes to integrate since it provides answers to his or her questions and searches. However, it is observed that selectivity in the recruitment and defection of potential members seems to limit the application of the extrinsic model. Before someone converts, the group he or she wishes to join should identify the reasons why the individual changes his or her religion, as these reasons may play a decisive role. Enzo Pace's studies highlight four distinct types of conversion: rational-instrumental conversion, rational value-oriented conversion, traditional-conformist conversion, and subjective charismatic conversion. Limited evidence supports the idea that people are restricted from joining totalitarian groups voluntarily, against their will, or that the new self resulting from a conversion experience in such groups is imposed independently of personal identity.

Research reveals that people convert for a variety of reasons. However, in order to analyze and make decisions regarding the causes of metanoia, David Snow and Richard Machalek identify five main causes that lead to metanoia and conduct an analysis of them.

During the conversion process, as metanoia, intellectual and ethical factors may play an important role, but the decision-making factor is closely related to the formed collective emotional attachment. In conclusion, theoretically, the groups and the solutions a person seek are unlimited, but the seeker cannot give up his or her personality and choices.

It is particularly relevant that in Europe, since the Renaissance the question of art has been closely linked to religious images. The rise of art in this context was a crucial moment in the evolution of the history of pictures and was of fundamental importance in the development of art itself. The paintings were not only representative for the artist's name but also reflected his personal views on the religious. Artistic practice began without a defined concept of art but evolved into a distinctive form that differentiated works of art from other forms of artistic expression. Initially, the notion of art was particularly associated with religious paintings, and religious themes have continued to predominate. In a constantly developing art market, personal

artistic style became a distinctive feature. In the French writings of the period, the term 'art' was introduced in connection with science.

Specific characteristics of Orthodox theological thought include a contemplative orientation and a predilection for religious mysteries and symbolism. Eastern thought in general also contains Hellenic philosophical elements, which may, to some extent, explain this attraction to mysticism and meditation specific to Orthodox theological thinking. Beyond the strictly literary meaning of the biblical texts, there is a profound and mysterious meaning which goes to the depth of the divine mysteries.

Since its beginnings, the theology of the East has been characterized by an admirable balance. It chooses the middle way and benefits from the gift of discernment, which protects it from excessive errors and one-sidedness. In Orthodoxy, there is a perfect balance between the horizontal and the vertical, whereby the ephemeral beauty of persons is reflected in the depth of spiritual communion with God and others.

Man is the kin of God, St. Gregory of Nyssa tells us, being an image of the unspeakable glory of God, even though he bears the marks and wounds of sin. Therefore, it yearns for God, the source of Goodness and Beauty. Through his Incarnation, the Son of God opens the way to eternity for us human beings, becoming our ladder to heaven and revealing our true destiny through this spiritual bond with him. Man, who is created in the image and likeness of God, is the only created being who naturally possesses all the elements of the existential quest for what is beautiful and perfect.

Man's thirst for knowledge (a recurrent motif in Socrates' philosophy) can be satisfied only by the discovery of man's true purpose, which consists in a permanent ascent towards likeness to his God through the divine grace communicated to him as the fruit of the redemption accomplished through the God-Man Jesus Christ.

Man's ascent to the likeness of God is completed in glory, transforming the fallen image into the image of divine glory. This legitimizes the theology of the icon within Orthodoxy. The icon is the very root of Orthodoxy, the dimension of Christianity without which icons cannot exist. The icon is integrated into the doctrinal essence of Orthodoxy and is closely linked to the central themes of Orthodox theology.

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