



THE ICON AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN HUMANITY AND THE TRANSCENDENT: COLOR SEMIOTICS IN THE ETHICS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

*O ÍCONE COMO MEDIADOR ENTRE A HUMANIDADE E O
TRANSCENDENTE: SEMIÓTICA DA COR NA ÉTICA DO
DESENVOLVIMENTO SUSTENTÁVEL*


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Abstract

The icon, as a mediator between humanity and the transcendent, occupies a unique position at the crossroads of metaphysics, aesthetics, and cultural memory. Its symbolic language-particularly the semiotics of color-offers a framework through which spiritual truths are made visible and embodied in material form. This article explores the ethical significance of icons within the paradigm of sustainable development, where sacred symbolism intersects with ecological responsibility, cultural resilience, and the search for harmonious coexistence. Alongside theoretical reflection, the study also includes an empirical exploration conducted among young people, emphasizing how contemporary perceptions of icons continue to shape values essential for sustainable futures. In this sense, the icon emerges not only as a theological and aesthetic artifact, but also as a dynamic resource for rethinking humanity's ethical orientation in an age of

Resumo

O ícone, como mediador entre a humanidade e o transcendente, ocupa uma posição singular na encruzilhada entre a metafísica, a estética e a memória cultural. Sua linguagem simbólica em particular, a semiótica da cor oferece um quadro por meio do qual as verdades espirituais se tornam visíveis e se encarnam em forma material. Este artigo explora o significado ético dos ícones dentro do paradigma do desenvolvimento sustentável, onde o simbolismo sagrado se entrelaça com a responsabilidade ecológica, a resiliência cultural e a busca por uma convivência harmoniosa. Juntamente com a reflexão teórica, o estudo inclui também uma investigação empírica realizada entre jovens, destacando como as percepções contemporâneas sobre os ícones continuam a moldar valores essenciais para futuros sustentáveis. Nesse sentido, o ícone surge não apenas como artefato teológico e estético, mas também como um recurso dinâmico para repensar a orientação ética da humanidade em uma era de transformação global.

Palavras-chave: Ícone. Símbolo Sagrado. Transcendência. Semiótica da Cor. Contemporaneidade Religiosa. Semântica do Sagrado. Sociedade Pós-secular. Patrimônio Cultural. Sustentabilidade. Ontologia do Sagrado. Diálogo Interdisciplinar.

1. Introduction

The icon, as a phenomenon of sacred art, represents a distinctive ontological mode of perceiving reality that transcends the empirical world, serving as a mediator between the human and the divine. It is not merely an aesthetic form or a stylistic manifestation of a particular epoch, but a spiritual orientation point, a channel of theophany - the embodiment of transcendent light that enables humanity to enter into a mystical dialogue with God.

As Fr. I. Muzychka notes, "art creates our union with God or contributes to such a union, touching our mind, emotions, will, and imagination through its symbolism" (Muzychka, 1999, p. 96). This statement highlights that the icon, as an artistic object, is not only a visible image but also a sacred act that shapes the inner world of the human being, initiating participation in the transcendent experience. In this sense, sacred art is not simply a cultural phenomenon, but a form of spiritual communication that transforms one's worldview and opens a path toward union with the Absolute.

The icon constitutes a special form of imagery that goes beyond the limits of realistic representation, functioning as a metaphysical "window" into another dimension of being. According to V. Ovsichuk and D. Krvavych, it creates a space of transition between the manifest and the hidden, the material and the spiritual — a space actualized in the context of liturgy, where the icon acquires the status of a "real symbol" through which the believer touches the sphere of the heavenly (Ovsichuk & Krvavych, 2000, p. 305). Thus, the icon is not a static object but acquires its genuine ontological meaning within the sacred space of worship. At the same time, further research is required to clarify whether such transcendent symbolism can also be perceived beyond faith-based frameworks.

Icon painting may be described as the embodiment of symbolic thinking that manifests the goodness of being and opens gnoseological horizons of perception. It is not about visual resemblance, but about the manifestation of the prototype, the expression of divine eidos. Sensory forms here are not merely aesthetic means, but signs of participation in the Logos — the primordial Word, the source of all existence. In this regard, S. Krymskyi emphasizes that the nature of the iconographic image lies in the attempt not to convey the external but to signify the internal — a symbolic contact with the Absolute (Krymsky, 2007, p.123). Consequently, the icon is not only an aesthetic bearer of spirituality but also a means of apprehending metaphysical categories of being. This unique iconographic code regulates its structure and symbolism, orienting it not toward external realism but toward spiritual

truth.

From this perspective, iconography affirms a new paradigm of being in which the ideal rather than the empirical dominates — one that requires faith, trust, and openness of the heart. Such openness allows the individual to receive the reality that is revealed in the icon not as an image but as a revelation. As D. Stepovyk argue, the theoretical foundation of iconographic aesthetics is the transformation of sensory experience and the corresponding spiritual transfiguration of the person (Stepovyk, 2004a, p. 180). Thus, an encounter with the icon is not merely an act of cognition but also a path of purification — a form of participation in divine presence that transcends the physical world.

The icon also reveals a specific spatio-temporal dimension. As P. Florensky observed, the phenomenon of reverse perspective in iconography correlates with the idea of the "reversal of time", where the temporal vector flows not from past to future but from eternity into the present (Krymsky, 2007). Within this perspective, the icon is not a purely historical object but a meta-historical artifact in which linear temporality yields to the eternal actuality of the sacred.

In conclusion, the icon as a phenomenon of sacred art synthesizes theological reflection, mystical experience, and artistic form, embodying the light of the transcendent. It does not merely reflect the world but creates a new ontology that unites the human with the divine. In this sense, the icon emerges as a dynamic spiritual act, enabling the knowledge of the Absolute and opening the way toward the transcendent.

Yet, beyond its theological dimension, the icon also resonates with the ethics of sustainable development. As a symbolic mediator, it cultivates values of harmony, responsibility, and reverence for creation — values that extend beyond religious practice into the global discourse on sustainability. By orienting the human being toward transcendence, the icon also educates the capacity for ethical perception of the environment, social solidarity, and an economy of spiritual rather than purely material growth. Thus, the study of the icon in the light of color semiotics is not only an exploration of metaphysical aesthetics but also a contribution to the ethical foundations of sustainable development.

2. Materials and Methods

The analysis of scholarly literature demonstrates that the phenomenon of the icon in contemporary socio-cultural space performs not only a sacred but also a communicative and semiotic function. Within the multidirectional context of moder-

nity, the icon emerges as a symbol that bridges the traditional with the post-secular, faith with interpretation, and the sacred with the aesthetic. Its perception varies significantly depending on the individual's worldview orientation, religious experience, spiritual reflection, and affiliation with particular philosophical or theological systems.

In order to gain deeper insights into the perception of the sacred across diverse socio-worldview systems, an empirical study was conducted. The study involved 140 participants of youth age (17–25 years), all of whom were students of higher educational institutions in Ukraine. An original questionnaire was developed by the author and administered through Google Forms to facilitate data collection. It should be noted, however, that the relatively narrow age range and the Ukrainian-only sample limit the potential for cross-cultural generalization. Broader inclusion across societies, generations, and religious backgrounds would provide more comprehensive insights and represents a direction for future research.

The participants represented different academic and worldview contexts:

- Philosophy students at The Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University (35 participants), representing a rational-reflective approach to understanding the sacred;
- Visual Arts students at The National Academy of Visual Arts and Architecture (35 participants), engaged in the visual-aesthetic dimension of perceiving the icon;
- Seminarians from Kyiv Theological Seminary of the Three Holy Hierarchs and Kyiv Orthodox Theological Academy (35 participants), embodying the traditional-theological interpretation of the sacred image;
- Students of other disciplines — ranging from technical to socio-humanitarian fields (35 participants), reflecting the broad secular dimension of perception.

This methodological design allowed for the exploration of the icon's reception not only within religiously engaged groups but also in secular academic environments, thereby creating a multi-perspectival framework of analysis.

Furthermore, the chosen sample reflects a crucial intersection for the ethics of sustainable development: young people at the formative stage of identity construction. Their perception of the icon — whether theological, aesthetic, or secular — provides insight into how symbols of transcendence can inform ethical sensitivity, cultural sustainability, and intergenerational responsibility. The methodological approach thus connects semiotic analysis with the broader discourse on sustainability,

highlighting how sacred symbols may foster dialogical openness, respect for diversity, and value-oriented development beyond purely material paradigms.

3. Results

3.1 Historical and Cultural Context of the Icon

The term iconography derives from two Greek words: (image, likeness, figure) and (description, depiction). In its broadest sense, and consistent with its etymology, it denotes the discipline concerned with the description and study of images, regardless of subject, genre, or medium (Girbea, 2019, p. 445). In the narrower sense relevant here, however, iconography is the science of icons and ecclesiastical painting in general. For Christians, this discipline has profound spiritual significance. The Church Fathers stressed that the icon functions as a visual "Gospel for the illiterate": "Images are created in churches so that one who cannot read may, by looking at the walls, read what is not accessible in books. If the mind fails to comprehend the spoken word, the eye, which perceives truth directly, interprets it more clearly" (Aseev, 1980, p. 74). Thus, the icon transmits the foundations of faith through imagery accessible to all. Yet, the theological depth and sacred meaning of the Orthodox icon cannot be comprehended without substantial knowledge of iconography, the history of religious art, and the traditional symbolic system.

The origins of Orthodox icon painting are connected to the early stages of Christianity as a worldview system. In the pre-Byzantine period (1st–3rd centuries), the first images of sacred figures and events emerged as exteriorizations of the numinous experience of believers. Tradition holds that the first icons were painted by Luke the Evangelist. These early portraits, marked by naturalism and expressive emotion, resembled funerary images of real persons.

The institutionalization of the Church during the Byzantine Empire brought further development. Under Emperor Justinian I, the foundations of canonical representation were established, with the decrees of the Sixth Ecumenical Council (680–681) shaping a shift from Old Testament symbols to direct representation (Presich, 2012). Realism gradually gave way to symbolic complexity, designed to transmit theological truth, as exemplified by Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and the Ravenna mosaics.

The iconoclastic controversy of the 8th–9th centuries constituted a decisive turning point. Iconoclasts rejected anthropomorphic depictions of God and the

saints, grounding their opposition in the biblical commandment: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Ex. 20:4). Emperor Leo III's edict forbade veneration of icons, leading to widespread destruction of sacred images and persecution of iconographers (Stepovyk, 2004b).

Nevertheless, icons continued to be produced in the provinces, and the crisis eventually led to a renewed theological understanding of their nature. The Seventh Ecumenical Council restored icon veneration, solemnly declaring: "We preserve intact all the traditions of the Church, whether written or unwritten. Among these is the making of pictorial representations in churches, which, in accordance with the history of the Gospel message, serves to confirm the truth that God the Word truly, and not merely in appearance, became incarnate for our benefit" (Ovsiichuk & Krvavych, 2000, p. 325). This marked the consolidation of the Byzantine iconographic canon, where the icon was understood not as an idol, but as a testimony to the reality of the Incarnation and as a mediator of divine presence.

During the Macedonian Renaissance (9th–11th centuries), the iconographic canon reached maturity: figures became more austere and ascetic, spatial representation more schematic, and color more symbolic. After the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the icon was transformed from a contested object into a sacred cultural phenomenon. As the Council declared: "We preserve intact all the traditions of the Church, whether written or unwritten. Among these is the making of pictorial representations in churches, which, in accordance with the history of the Gospel message, serves to confirm the truth that God the Word truly, and not merely in appearance, became incarnate for our benefit" (Ovsiichuk & Krvavych, 2000, p. 299). Byzantine traditions later entered Kyivan Rus' with the Christianization of 988, inspiring masterpieces such as the Vladimir Mother of God, Christ Pantocrator, and the mosaics of Saint Sophia Cathedral.

Later centuries witnessed regionalization and stylistic diversification. The Galician-Volhynian school of the 13th–14th centuries combined Byzantine models with local traditions, producing an original and vivid style (Stepovyk, 2004b, p. 376). Peremyshl' and later Lviv became major centers of Ukrainian iconography from the 14th to 16th centuries (Patriarch Dymytrii (Yarema), 2005, p. 388). By the early modern era, Ukrainian iconography reflected contact with both Western Europe and Eastern Orthodoxy. Mannerist tendencies, allegory, and symbolic elaboration appeared alongside the persistence of Byzantine heritage (Ovsiichuk & Krvavych, 2000, p. 208).

In the 17th–18th centuries, Ukrainian iconography was influenced by Wes-

tern baroque, giving rise to monumental multi-tiered iconostases and richly detailed compositions (O. Triska, & O. Shpak, 2021, p. 923). The 19th century saw the impact of classicism and romanticism, introducing idealized forms and ethnographic motifs. At the turn of the 20th century, movements such as Boichukism or Neo-Byzantinism sought to revive early medieval traditions in a modern key (Stepovyk, 2004b, p. 389). The rediscovery of the icon in the early 20th century stimulated both artistic revival and scholarly inquiry into its theological and aesthetic meaning.

Thus, Orthodox iconography has traversed a long path of development — from naturalistic funerary portraits to a highly codified sacred art, synthesizing Eastern and Western cultural traditions. Icons were not perceived merely as visual records of biblical events but as "heavenly revelations", renewed by each generation of iconographers through prayer within the boundaries of canon. Despite cycles of prohibition and renewal, iconography has survived, sustained by the source of Christian faith while simultaneously reflecting the richness of national and regional traditions.

From the standpoint of sustainable development, this historical trajectory demonstrates how sacred art preserves continuity across centuries, nurturing cultural memory and ethical values. The resilience of iconography through crises such as iconoclasm or political upheaval illustrates a model of sustainability rooted not in material permanence but in symbolic and spiritual continuity. Icons thus embody a cultural ecology where tradition, adaptation, and renewal coexist — a paradigm of sustainability that transcends the religious sphere and contributes to contemporary discussions on cultural resilience, ethical responsibility, and the preservation of intangible heritage.

3.2 The Semiotics of Color in Sacred Iconography

From ontological and phenomenological perspectives, scholars argue that religious symbolism, characteristic of advanced religious paradigms, employs a network of symbolic representations to express diverse abstract concepts and doctrinal truths. This religious symbolism can take the form of material, verbal, or iconographic signs, possessing a ritual character and serving as an epistemological equivalent or substitute for sacred texts, theological constructs, and ethical precepts.

There are numerous examples of such religious semiotics. In the Christian tradition, for instance, the lamb often serves as a symbolic construct representing Jesus Christ, while depictions of animals and birds can symbolize the four Evangelists. In sacred art, these symbols carry boundless hermeneutic potential and

can convey unarticulated meaning; yet the epistemological challenge remains: how transcendent realities are embodied in these symbolic constructs.

The issue of depicting the Divine has held profound significance in Christianity and has been the subject of theological debate for centuries. Although the Christian God assumed human form and became perceptible, theologians had to exert considerable effort to justify the appropriateness and necessity of using anthropomorphic images in Christian worship, arguing that the artistic image, even without ontological unity with the prototype, symbolically reflects its spiritual essence.

Byzantine thinkers such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, John of Damascus, and Theodore the Studite contributed significantly to the development of the concept of the symbolic image. They based their approach on the biblical principle that humans are created in the image and likeness of God, thereby legitimizing the use of symbolic representations of the divine and saints in human form, treating the physical human image as an expression of spirituality. Their approach emphasized the elevation of the human spirit through symbolic imagery toward higher truth, contributing to the formation of Byzantine aesthetics.

Within the Byzantine tradition, icons are conceived as an environment of mutual transition between the visible and the invisible — a kind of "window" that opens only during liturgical services. In this context, icons become "real symbols", through which the faithful experience a connection to the heavenly realm (Ovsiichuk & Krvavych, 2000, p. 305). They reflect not only objects but also composition, technique, and the symbolism of colors, expressing multiple aspects of doctrine. Color in an icon is not a mere material property; it embodies spiritual essence in physical space and the intensity of inner life.

Ancient iconographers employed a limited palette of colors designed to evoke mystical experiences. Colors were not repeated identically within the same iconographic scene. The interaction of colors, like the composition itself, is perceived synthetically, as a unified whole within a single mystical experience. In an icon, a viewer encounters not a local color but a range and combination of colors. This approach ensured a simplified yet profound perception of the image. The use of colors in icons draws upon the works of Dionysius the Areopagite and reflects diverse aspects of spirituality and faith. Although the meanings of colors evolved gradually, certain rules remained to organize the imagery effectively (Volosiuk, 2013).

Red held dual significance. On one hand, it symbolized divine energy, life-giving force, and glory, used to depict warrior saints such as Saint George, Theodore Stratelates, John the Warrior and others. On the other hand, red also represented holy martyrs who shed their blood in fidelity to Christ: "Come now, and let us have

an argument together, says the Lord: how may your sins which are red like blood be white as snow? how may their dark purple seem like wool?"(Isaiah 1:18). Christ himself was often depicted in red rather than crimson, highlighting the truthfulness of His incarnation and the shedding of blood for humanity's salvation. Philosophically, this reflects the idea of self-sacrifice, renunciation of selfish desires for a higher purpose. Red also embodies divine wrath and just punishment for sins, reminding the faithful of inevitable retribution for immoral acts.

Blue is frequently associated with the sky, serenity, and spirituality. In Christian art, blue may symbolize blessing and spiritual purity. For example, blue threads were commanded for the garments of the Israelites: "Say to the children of Israel that through all their generations they are to put on the edges of their robes an ornament of twisted threads, and in every ornament a blue cord"(Numbers 15:38). Blue embodies spirituality, blessing, and fidelity; it represents the heavens and the Virgin Mary, symbolizing the soul's aspiration toward the transcendent and purity of thought. Blue can also bear negative connotations, used to depict fallen angels, demons, and pagan figures (Petzold, 2016, p. 445). Its philosophy is the eternal search for truth and harmony with the world and God.

Green in iconography can signify life, growth, and fertility: "He makes a resting-place for me in the green fields: he is my guide by the quiet waters" (Psalms 23:2). Here, green represents abundance and peace under God's guidance. It is the life-giving color of nature and renewal, symbolizing hope for the resurrection of the soul. In some traditions, green denotes angels or saints with a special connection to nature. Philosophically, green reflects faith in the cyclicity of existence, the immortality of the soul, and the potential for cleansing from sins and beginning anew.

In Orthodox iconography, white symbolizes purity, light, joy, and divine glory surrounding Christ in moments such as the Transfiguration, Nativity, and Resurrection. It also highlights sanctity, innocence, and the purity of the soul, traditionally applied to the garments of saints and angelic wings. In many icons of the Resurrection, Christ is depicted in white garments: "

But you have some names in Sardis who have kept clean their robes; and as a reward they will go in white with me. He who overcomes will be dressed in white, and I will not take his name from the book of life, and I will give witness to his name before my Father, and before his angels" (Revelation 3:4-5). White represents holiness, purity, and divine light, the sinlessness of the soul, freedom from passions, and enlightenment. White embodies the absolute truth of being, the innocence of God's creatures prior to the Fall. Philosophically, white denotes the path of self-knowledge

and union with God.

Brown recalls dust, the human nature that "came from the earth and to the earth shall return". Its use in iconography suggests that while the material is transient, the spiritual is eternal — a reminder of the finitude of the flesh and the need for spiritual self-perfection to attain immortality. The philosophy of brown emphasizes awareness of physical impermanence and the search for higher meaning.

Black fully absorbs light, associated with evil and profound darkness. It is also used to depict the attire of monks who renounce all corporeal and worldly attachments. Black appears in scenes such as the Last Judgment, where devils and sinners are painted black, symbolizing darkness and moral corruption. Christ's cross is also depicted in black, representing His suffering and humanity's sins atoned through His death (Laskarova-Ivanova, 2023, p. 4). Black's philosophy conveys the futility of existence without spiritual values, the eternal night of ignorance.

Yellow may symbolize light, fire, and divine insight, denoting the illumination or presence of the Divine. It represents rays of sacred knowledge, intellectual enlightenment, and harmony with the light of truth. Philosophically, yellow signifies understanding through revelation, the mystical illumination of the soul.

Gold and silver bear similar meanings, symbolizing purity and often exemplifying the eloquence of Gospel teaching: "And the twelve doors were twelve pearls; every door was made of one pearl; and the street of the town was clear gold, as clear as glass" (Revelation 21:21). Gold and silver represent the heavenly glory of God's Kingdom, radiating spiritual perfection. Gold, carrying aesthetic weight, further expresses the hidden meaning of the heavenly kingdom reflected in the sacred temple. To distinguish this divine radiance from worldly gold, church artists enhanced its glow with light effects. No other color could so effectively simulate the presence of celestial light in a church; thus, gold became the royal color within the iconographic system (Volosiuk, 2013).

Interestingly, gray was never used in icons. As a mixture of black and white, it was perceived by iconographers as ambiguity, emptiness, or nonexistence, with no place in sacred imagery. Iconic philosophy is precise and unambiguous, representing higher ideals of being in their immutable perfection.

Other colors, such as crimson or purple, conveyed royal authority and grandeur, used for depicting garments of holy kings and princes: "The king, crying out with a loud voice, said that the users of secret arts, the Chaldaeans, and the readers of signs, were to be sent for. The king made answer and said to the wise men of Babylon, Whoever is able to make out this writing, and make clear to me the sense of it, will be clothed in purple and have a chain of gold round his neck, and will

be a ruler of high authority in the kingdom" (Daniel 5:7). Purple could also signify threat and fire, frequently used in Last Judgment scenes: "Then he let Barabbas go free: but after having Jesus whipped, he gave him up to be put to death on the cross. Then the ruler's armed men took Jesus into the open square, and got all their band together. And they took off his clothing, and put on him a scarlet robe" (Matthew 27:26–28). Here, scarlet symbolizes Christ's suffering, humiliation, and royal dignity.

Beyond specific colors, the Bible contains terms for combinations of colors or indeterminate hues, including: emeralds (Ezekiel 27:16), coloured (Ezekiel 27:24, Genesis 30:32), mixed colour (Zechariah 6:3), blood-red (Isaiah 63:1) and bright-colored (Jeremiah 12:9). Iconographers often employ contrasting colors to enhance expressive clarity, emphasizing the distinctiveness of each depicted face. Occasionally, light reflections appear on saints, symbolizing eternal uncreated light — divine energies merging with the souls of the saints. This light is not an external source but a reflection of eternal divine light existing beyond time and space. Eternal life is viewed as a progressive path toward God, illuminated by eternal light. Light reflections in icons serve as visual signs of communion with God, in which the saints participate.

The symbolic interpretation of colors in iconography is deeply rooted in religious and cultural traditions. Each color carries specific meaning, helping to convey spirituality and faith through visual art. Understanding the semiotics of color in iconography opens new depths for those studying religious art and its influence on culture and society. Hermeneutic analysis reveals that iconographic semiotic codes represent not only visual images but also compositional choices, technical methods, and color symbolism, explicating multiple aspects of religious dogma. The sacred symbolism inherent in icons manifests abstract concepts and doctrinal postulates while facilitating transcendent apprehension of spiritual essence within the material realm.

A key element of iconographic practice is the use of colors, each serving as a carrier of a unique symbolic code, enabling the visualization of spiritual archetypes and religious ideas through artistic representation. The palette of icons conveys a comprehensive philosophical worldview, universal laws of being, and the existential aspiration of the human soul for union with the Absolute. These are not mere pigments but visualized archetypes of the collective unconscious. Decoding the symbolic paradigm of colors in iconography opens new hermeneutic horizons for sacred art and its impact on the cultural matrix of society. At the same time, the increasing role of digital reproduction raises important questions about how pixels,

screens, and modern technological media may transform or diminish these symbolic meanings, a dimension that requires further scholarly reflection.

3.3 Perception of Icons Across Different Socio-Worldview Groups

The significance of analyzing contemporary perceptions of icons lies in the fact that such inquiry enables us to trace how sacred symbolism is sustained, transformed, or reinterpreted within the pluralistic landscape of modern culture. By engaging with diverse socio-worldview groups, this study seeks to uncover not only the phenomenology of religious experience but also the potential of symbolic heritage to contribute to cultural sustainability. In this sense, the icon serves as more than an artifact of the past; it is a mediator between tradition and the ethical challenges of sustainable development, preserving continuity while opening new interpretative horizons.

Transitioning to the block of the research — "Attitudes toward Icons— we attempt a philosophical-anthropological exploration of the symbolic world of contemporary youth. The icon is here examined as a sacred image, a phenomenon of religious consciousness, and a form of visualizing the transcendent in relation to the worldview orientations of respondents from different educational backgrounds. This section addresses the ontology of the sign, the phenomenology of religious experience, and the problem of the sacred in the context of a secularized culture.

In the first question, participants were asked to name three associations that arise upon hearing the word "icon". The aim was to conduct a content analysis of lexical associations in order to identify the most representative concepts linked to the icon and to highlight potential differences in perception depending on specialization.

Tabela 1: Semantic Associations with the Word “Icon”

| Association | Frequency of Mentions |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Church/Temple | 42 |
| God | 38 |
| Image | 36 |
| Holiness/Saints | 30 |
| Prayer | 27 |
| Art | 25 |
| Tradition/Heritage | 20 |
| Light/Candles | 18 |
| Spirit | 16 |
| Spiritual Legacy | 15 |

Source: Prepared by the authors (2024).

These results suggest a predominantly sacred-religious orientation of the icon as a symbol in the respondents’ perceptions. The icon emerges as an object of spiritual contemplation, concentration, and mystical presence, while at the same time it retains tangible attributes (light, candles) and artistic value. At this level, we already observe the coexistence of two ontological dimensions: the transcendent (God, prayer, holiness) and the empirically visible (image, art, heritage).

The responses in this block reveal an understanding of the icon as an ontological channel of communication with the divine, as the embodiment of sacred symbolism and the canonical manifestation of the heavenly within the earthly. Here, the icon is not conceived merely as a "painting", but as a theophanic act — a "theology in colors", as one respondent aptly expressed.

To deepen our exploration of the icon as both a sacred and cultural phenomenon, we asked respondents the question: "In your opinion, how has the perception of icons changed in contemporary society?" This inquiry was intended not only to trace shifting attitudes toward the sacred image but also to highlight how these transformations resonate with broader concerns of sustainable development, particularly in the preservation of cultural and spiritual heritage. The responses reveal a certain worldview polarization.

The answers of philosophers were marked by a high degree of reflection. Some emphasized the desacralization of the image, its aestheticization, and the loss of mystical depth that was once inseparable from the icon. Increasingly, the icon is seen as a symbol of a past religious culture rather than as an object of direct spiritual practice. In some responses, epistemological uncertainty emerged — a concern with clarifying the temporal and cultural boundaries of change — indicating the philosophical aspiration to refine concepts rather than merely fix

them. This reflective approach itself can be linked to sustainability, as it underscores the need for careful conceptual stewardship of traditions rather than their uncritical reproduction.

Theologians, in contrast, most consistently articulated concern over the changing sacred status of the icon. Several spoke of the loss of mysticism, the inability of modern individuals to "see with the heart", and the reduction of the icon to mere decoration. Iconoclastic or indifferent-aesthetic tendencies in contemporary culture were evaluated critically, with clear emphasis on the distancing from the traditional ontology of the icon as a "window into eternity". Here, sustainable development appears in the form of a call to protect not only the material but also the intangible spiritual dimension of cultural heritage.

Representatives of the visual arts registered the shift in the icon's function from within artistic practice itself. Their answers reflected an awareness of the crisis of symbolic thinking: the icon is increasingly perceived as an ornament, an artistic artifact, or even as an image of pop-cultural figures. Yet there was also a note of nostalgia for the lost sacred content and an attempt to document these changes among the younger generation, which is gradually losing its religious connection with the image. This tension between innovation and tradition directly mirrors the dilemmas of sustainable cultural development: how to integrate evolving aesthetic sensibilities without eroding the continuity of spiritual meaning.

Among respondents of other specializations, the answers were less detailed, but a general tendency toward a detached or secular outlook was observed. The icon was often perceived as an element of art, culture, or interior design. Some respondents explicitly acknowledged the loss of value associated with the icon, while others were unable to formulate a clear position due to lack of involvement in the religious context. This diffusion of meaning signals a challenge for sustainability: without deliberate efforts to maintain living traditions, symbols risk being reduced to superficial markers, stripped of their ontological depth.

The final section of the study, the "Interdisciplinary Question", represents an attempt to bring together all previous layers of reflection on the sacred image into a central inquiry: how does one's professional activity influence the perception of icons? By analyzing responses from representatives of diverse educational backgrounds, we can trace not only the epistemological positions from which they approach the icon but also the anthropological dimension of how profession shapes worldview. This perspective itself aligns with the principles of sustainable development, highlighting the role of knowledge diversity and professional practices in preserving cultural and spiritual heritage.

Theologians were unanimous in affirming that their vocation not only influences but fundamentally shapes their perception of the icon, deeply embedding it into both personal and professional identity. For them, the icon is neither merely an aesthetic image nor a symbol, but a living window into the sacred, a constant reminder of calling, faith, and responsibility. As one respondent expressed: "For me, the icon is no longer just part of the church — it is part of my daily ministry. Even when I do not see it, I remember it". Another added: "I began to perceive the icon as a person, before whom one must remain sincere". A third noted: "My ministry forms in me the ability to see in the icon not only the image of the saint but also the mirror of my own vocation". Among theologians we observe a unified worldview, where the professional and the spiritual exist in inseparable unity — a model of continuity highly relevant to sustainable cultural identity.

Philosophers, in contrast, displayed pluralism in their approaches, ranging from hermeneutic to historiosophical, aesthetic to metaphysical. One respondent stated: "Philosophy teaches us to seek meaning, to conceptually interpret every element, so the icon for me is not just a work of art but a window into the spiritual world". Another noted: "It is a fusion of aesthetic, theological, and philosophical content that compels deeper reflection". Yet more skeptical voices also appeared: "It most likely does not influence me, but thanks to my profession I will have more words and arguments". Here, the philosopher emerges as an interpreter of symbols — not necessarily a believer, but one who sustains the dialogical life of meaning. In terms of sustainable development, such critical reflection underscores the need for intellectual stewardship of heritage, ensuring it is not reduced to static tradition but remains open to conceptual renewal.

Artists displayed a striking phenomenon of divided vision: on the one hand, a deep technical and stylistic appreciation of the icon as an artistic work; on the other, a detachment from its sacred dimension. One respondent wrote: "I perceive it as part of my activity, since we even have a specialization in sacred art... Religion was a driver of art". Yet another frankly admitted: "After studying Christian art, I perceive icons 100% as works of art... I no longer see sacred meaning in them". A paradox emerges: the deeper the artistic knowledge, the weaker the religious intention. As one student confessed: "My professional activity makes me pay more attention to technique and color combinations than to religious meaning". Still, others sought balance: "It helps me analyze the icon as an artwork, but also as an object for religious use". This tension illustrates the sustainable development challenge of balancing innovation with continuity — safeguarding spiritual depth without stifling evolving artistic practice.

In the humanities and applied sciences, the dominant approach was rational-analytical or observational: "I evaluate the colors, the style of the icon's writing, and so on", or "I look at icons through the social factors of their creation and reception", or "My activity can actualize the question of icons in the modern world". A medical student offered a particularly insightful typology: "People with a creative orientation see art; those with a religious one see meaning; those with a scientific one search for evidence". This is an ideal example of interdisciplinary consciousness, in which the icon emerges not as a univocal object but as a site of intersecting perspectives. At the same time, more distant responses also appeared: "Not at all" (physics, law, economics), or even indifference: "I'm not sure it has any influence". Yet even such answers form part of the mosaic, reflecting the challenge posed by icons to secular consciousness, which often perceives them no longer as sacred but merely as cultural.

4. Conclusions

The icon emerges not merely as a sacred image but as a complex philosophical-ontological construct operating at the intersection of metaphysics, aesthetics, cultural memory, and individual experience. It embodies a symbolic truth that does not simply represent the divine but also provokes personal transformation through participation in the sacred dialogue. The first chapter of this study emphasizes the icon as an ontological bridge between the transcendent and the immanent, where the category of symbol functions not as a conventional sign but as a reality mediating between being and meaning, opening access to the Absolute through the experience of the sacred. The second chapter demonstrates that this philosophical construct acquires concrete manifestations in the consciousness of contemporary youth, who — depending on their worldview — either reinforce the icon's sacred ontology or lean toward its aestheticization and cultural interpretation.

The empirical findings confirm the hermeneutical flexibility of the icon as a phenomenon: for seminarians it operates as a mediator of spiritual experience, for philosophers as a symbolic text, for artists as an artistic object, and for representatives of secular academic fields as a cultural code. This polyphony shows that the icon is not a fixed sign but one that remains in a process of ongoing hermeneutical renewal. Its symbolism is inherently open: it absorbs changing contexts while retaining a sacred core capable of influencing existential and axiological dimensions of human life. The identified models of religious consciousness — integrative-religious, reflexive-critical, and aesthetic-indifferent — reveal different degrees of immersion

in the sacred and reflect broader shifts in the paradigms of perceiving the divine in contemporary post-secular society.

The results allow us to conclude that the icon today retains its potential for transcendent mediation, yet this function is realized through the prism of personal engagement, professional orientation, and cultural sensitivity. For some, it remains a theophanic "window into eternity"; for others, a hermeneutical metaphor; and for still others, an aesthetic artifact or a marker of tradition. Thus, the icon may be best understood as a phenomenon of multiple ontology, where sacred, cultural, and personal modes co-exist. Its significance does not vanish in the age of postmodernity but is instead transformed, adapted, and, at times, reduced — while simultaneously acquiring new modes of actualization. The identification of integrative-religious, reflexive-critical, and aesthetic-indifferent models of consciousness points to a dynamic shift in post-secular societies. This typology may serve as a foundation for longitudinal research, allowing future studies to trace how the transcendent role of the icon evolves across generations and in comparative dialogue between Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant traditions.

Placed in the horizon of sustainable development, these findings acquire additional weight. The icon demonstrates how cultural and spiritual heritage can endure through processes of reinterpretation, negotiation, and interdisciplinary dialogue. Sustainability here should not be reduced to material preservation alone, but expanded to encompass symbolic and spiritual resilience: the ability of a tradition to adapt without losing its core essence. The icon illustrates precisely this dynamic — preserving continuity with the sacred past while engaging contemporary forms of knowledge, art, and social reflection. Moreover, this perspective invites a more applied dimension: integrating sacred symbolism into educational curricula, museum practices, and cultural heritage policies could operationalize the link between resilience and sustainability, thereby enhancing the interdisciplinary relevance of such insights.

Accordingly, several recommendations can be formulated. In the academic field, it is crucial to continue investigating the icon as a metaphysical symbol within the context of shifting worldview systems, particularly through interdisciplinary approaches that unite theology, philosophy, art studies, and the social sciences. In practice, the icon can serve as an instrument of cultural dialogue and education, helping to bridge secular and religious sensibilities, fostering spiritual identity among younger generations, and promoting respect for cultural diversity. By combining the personal with the metaphysical, the empirical with the transcendent, the icon remains not only a phenomenon of philosophical reflection but also a model of sustain-

nable heritage — one that embodies resilience, adaptability, and the ongoing search for meaning in a pluralistic world.

Finally, this research underscores the need for further studies. Future investigations should focus on how the hermeneutics of the icon can be integrated into strategies of sustainable development — linking cultural heritage, education, and social cohesion. Such inquiries may reveal how sacred symbols can inform not only theological or artistic discourse, but also contribute to the global agenda of sustainability, fostering long-term cultural vitality, ethical awareness, and intergenerational continuity.

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