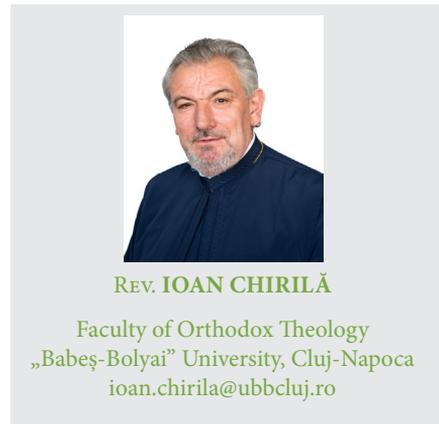


THE IMAGE AND FACE OF GOD – MANIFESTATIONS OF DIVINE LOVE THAT RENEW THE HUMAN NATURE

Abstract

This study explores the depth of biblical and patristic concepts of the face and image of God, emphasizing their profound connection to human renewal and becoming like God through divine revelation. The analysis focuses on the interpretation of the terms “tselem” and “panim,” which represent, respectively, the divine image in humans and the personal approach to God—an evolution involving inner transformation and participation in the life of the Trinity. It stresses that understanding this mystery requires going beyond external symbols and material forms to the heart of the Logos and the great mystery of love and communion revealed by Scripture. Drawing on the theological insights of the Church Fathers and contemporary theologians, it affirms that true likeness to God involves active, conscious participation in divine life through the grace of the Holy Spirit, as part of the process of spiritual “renewal.” In this view, humans become an “imago Dei” in a real, not merely formal, sense and partake in the eternal light of the Most Holy Trinity, effectively becoming “temple of God.” The study also explores the process of spiritual “transfiguration” described by patristic writings, which enables the soul and body to become eternal in Christ and continuous union with God. Through this theological perspective, it emphasizes that the image and face of God are not only symbols but living, participatory realities that reveal the ultimate destiny of human creation—returning to the divine origin in love and truth—until the fullness of the likeness of God is realized.



Keywords

Face, Image, Likeness, Pnevmatization, Renewal

Introduction

The relationship between the concepts of the image of God and the face of God is central in biblical teaching, holding multiple meanings and interpretations. The concepts of “face” (Heb. צֶלֶם – *tselem*) and “face” (Heb. פָּנִים – *panim*) are symbolic expressions of divine reflection in humans. The “face” associates humans with the image of God, as Psalms 8:5-6 states: man was made “a little lower than God (Elohim)” (Kraus 1993, 179). This suggests that, through creation, humans contain a reproduction of divine traits, a privileged position in creation, and a likeness in both form and function (Gerhard Von Rad 1967, 145). This likeness relates to moral stature and the potential for sharing in divine life. The “face” of God symbolizes revelation, closeness, and personal contact with the divine. In the Old Testament, the “face of God” becomes a symbol of divine presence and love, as well as a hidden revelation that is gradually revealed through faith and wisdom. This “face” is not simply a physical expression but a sign of intimate communication between God and humans. In Orthodox theology, this closeness can be understood as part of the theology of likeness, where the goal is not just external reproduction but inner transformation and genuine participation in the divine nature.

From the Church Fathers’ perspective, likeness to God implies a union with God, an act of spiritualization and overcoming formal limitations to achieve a profound unity in love and grace. The concept of “image” thus becomes crucial for understanding the human mission: humans not only carry within them an image of divinity but must nurture and develop it throughout their lives. Additionally, considering the name YHWH, “I am that I am,” which is directly linked to the verb “to be,” it highlights that God is not merely a static being, but rather has an essential and eternal existence. This also relates the “image” and the “face” to a continuous and participatory presence of the divine in human life. In this view, the relationship with God is not just about formal or symbolic elements. Still, it involves a conscious, living participation, through which humans increasingly resemble God to fulfil their potential in grace and truth. Therefore, the concepts of God’s “face” and “likeness” are not merely symbols of representation but reflect an intimate and reflective communion, where likeness to God becomes the highest aim of human life, expressed in the theology of likeness as active participation in the divine life.

The present study is organized into several sections, each addressing a key aspect of the central theme: the relationship between the image and face of God and the

process of human spiritual renewal. It begins by introducing the biblical and patristic concept of the divine face and Image, analysing the significance of the concepts “tselem” and “panim” and emphasizing the close relationship between God and humanity. The second part examines the transcendence of outward forms through spiritual wisdom, highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of pneumatization and the realization of the divine image in humans, inspired by the teachings of Church Fathers such as St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Macarius the Egyptian, and St. Gregory Palamas. The final section discusses the concept of “renewal” and becoming like God, integrating theological views on the processes of “theosis” and “homotheos,” and outlining the stages of participation and spiritual transformation. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of this journey of rediscovering our true divine identity and invites conscious involvement in the process of fulfilment in Christ, in Spirit, and the divine truth.

Beyond form – spiritual transcendence through the image and face of God

The spiritual morphology of God’s face and Image is a profound and captivating topic of debate, with biblical theology at its centre. Its goal is to help those receiving revelation to go beyond mere form and delve into the very essence of the Logos. In my past experiences and reflections on anthropological terms (Chirilă 2009, 49-64; Chirilă 2002, 134-42), I often used the concept of “morfi”—the essential form—to highlight the importance of embarking on a spiritual journey, as suggested by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware in his studies on anthropology (Ware 1996, 48-63). This journey involves key steps: developing a relationship with God, fostering spiritual growth, cultivating self-awareness, and ultimately achieving spiritual freedom. However, simply recognizing the “morfi,” the form, is not enough. The concept of “pnevmati” must also be included to indicate our actual point of convergence with God—a realm of the Spirit, a drawing near through serving the Holy Spirit, sharing and targeting the Spirit until we truly live in the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who causes all things to flourish and bear fruit (St. Basil the Great 1986, 92); all creation is quietly uplifted to heaven under His gentle influence.

St. Irenaeus of Lyon emphasizes that all things are created by the “two arms” of God—the Son and the Holy Spirit—implying that everything bears within it the logotic imprint of the Son and the spiritual imprint of the Spirit. It is a world born from the Image and animated by the Spirit, confirming St. Justin Popovich’s concept of

“logonost” (St. Justin Popovich 1997, 45). Avva Dorotheos’ words become clearer in this light: “God made man in His image, that is, immortal, self-possessed, adorned with all the fullness of God’s image” (Avva Dorotheos of Gazei 2020, 27) (our translations). This statement highlights attributes that suggest divine likeness ultimately involves the fullness of human pneumatization —the state of being “alike-to-God” (*homotheos*). Therefore, in anthropological discourse, it is crucial to restore this expressive essence of our being in its complete form and ongoing eschatological development. I propose relating the concepts articulated by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware to those of St. Justin Popovich, following the structure: human relationship or feeling—as a feeling of God, an unbroken communion with Christ; and growth—analysed through the lens of the Logos becoming flesh and elevating the human body to a glory surpassing that of angels, strengthening the bond between the soul and its Creator.

As we deepen our self-knowledge, our thinking shifts toward God-Logos incarnate, rediscovering its reason (*logos*), meaning (*noema*), and full significance (*pannoema*) (St. Justin Popovich 1997, 58-9; Ware 1996, 51). Freedom, in this sense, is reflected in the incarnation of the Logos, who became fully human. It is worthwhile to add to these thoughts the perspective of St. Maximus the Confessor, who offers a valuable insight into how humans open themselves to transcendence. St. Maximus describes the steps of the spirit toward the higher, of deepening in contemplation and wisdom, of how our reason and understanding become habits of unwavering contemplation, culminating in true wisdom. These reflections lead us to see man as a transcendental being, fulfilled and perfected through participation in divinity. In other words, the process of spiritual transformation is not simply an exchange of ideas or theories, but a profound experience—a return to the origins, a movement back to that primordial state of perfect communion with God (St. Maximus the Confessor 2017, 33).

St. Maximus the Confessor’s reflections on the mind give us further insight into this spiritual journey (St. Maximus the Confessor 2017, 36, 91, 96, 99, 100, 102, 136) According to him, the steps that follow reason and understanding are the apprehension, the ability to discern truth, and finally, the error-free contemplation that leads to wisdom. All this is part of a process of opening towards transcendence, of unifying man with the divine. This spiritual journey is, in essence, a regression to the communion that existed before the Fall, when man lived in perfect union with his Creator. It is a journey of rediscovering and returning to our identity, that identity of being created in the image and likeness of God, destined to live in eternal communion with him.

Spiritual morphology encourages us to go beyond mere exteriority and to go deeper into the spiritual process of our becoming. It is an inner journey that passes through all levels of existence, ultimately reaching that fullness of life in the Spirit, a life lived “with God”, reflecting his image and glory. Man’s process of becoming human can thus be seen as a holistic one, where every aspect of life is permeated and transformed by divine love and presence. This transformation is not just a theological theme, but a living reality—a call to our active and conscious participation in eternal life.

From Image to Likeness or on the perfection of man in Christ through the Spirit

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware’s work on the uniqueness of the human person deeply explores the mysterious theme of man as a “mystery,” an ancient yet always new idea rooted in biblical revelation and patristic tradition. Central to this reflection are the insights from St. John’s Revelation, which declare that Christ will give each person a white stone with a new name inscribed on it (Rev 2:17). This image represents the fact that, across ages, each human being harbours a profound mystery within—a secret shared only with God, reflecting an identity and existence that transcend external perception and even conscious understanding. To grasp this mystery, one must focus on the relationship—a fundamental yet often subtle and complex concept—between man and God. Ware emphasizes clearly that the biblical phrase “in our image” (Heb. בְּצֶלְמֵנוּ – *betsalmenu*, Gn 1:26-27) shows that man cannot be reduced to external qualities or seen as an independent, self-sufficient entity. Despite the modern view of the individual as a unity, Christianity always presents man to God, fellow human beings, and all creation, modeled on Trinitarian love. This “wholeness” is not merely about existing in the same space or time but about existing in communion—within a vital relationship—where the human being recognizes and fulfils their identity only through this connection (Ware 1996, 51). This foundational relationship in biblical and patristic theology is further illustrated by the expression כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ (*kidmuthenu*) – *likeness*. Suppose we interpret the particle “ki” as a demonstrative. In that case, this phrase indicates that the true mystery between each person and Christ—symbolized by the inscription on the white stone (Rev. 2:17)—transcends direct expression. It is an unwritten, deeply hidden mystery that only God fully knows but that humans can come to understand as they grow in likeness to Christ through the process of “pneumatization.”

This becomes clearer when we realize that between these two realities, man and God, there is a correspondence, a profound bond, a closeness achieved through service, seeking, and sharing of the Holy Spirit, culminating in living in the Spirit, illuminated by divine eternity.

Through this lens of relationship, the process of spiritual growth becomes a continuous fulfilment of the “ethos of triune communion” (Yannaras 2003, 16), that is, participation in the mutual self-giving between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, while each human being becomes a *templum Dei*, a temple of God, as if it were a small cosmos permeated by the divine presence. In this perspective, human existence is no longer simply a question of identity or social identity. Still, it becomes an act of continual participation in divine life, a perpetual renewal in the light of Trinitarian love. This high view of human nature finds its support in the thought of St. Maximus the Confessor and St. Macarius the Egyptian, who affirm that “every intelligent creature is created in the image of God, but only the *kalokagatic*, that is, the good and wise, is truly in his likeness” (St. Macarius the Egyptian, *On The Love III.25*, in PG 90:1024C – Ware 1996, 56). This differentiation between the created and the virtuous, between the created and the perfect being, emphasizes that the likeness of God is not an automatic gift, but a goal and a calling, which is realized in the process of human sanctification and ascetical work. Resemblance, in the most profound sense, presupposes an active and conscious participation in the spiritual life, in the grace which transforms us and raises us to the status of “homotheos” – of people in the image and likeness of God.

St. Justin Popovich emphasizes this idea when he speaks of the “mystical triad of virtues enriched by grace,” noting that the soul’s mystical relationship with Christ increases to “the measure of the conjugal intimacy of the bridegroom with the bride” (St. Justin Popovich 2014, 159). In this framework, Christ becomes the Bridegroom of the soul, and the soul His Bride – a profoundly spiritual union, a hierogamy, an infusion of divinity into the human being. This expresses the most beautiful and all-encompassing idea of knowing God as a sacramental and mystical encounter, culminating in the experience of “da’at YHWH/Elohim” – divine knowledge in its highest and most intimate form.

The one who progresses in this knowledge reaches what Metropolitan Kallistos Ware calls “the meaning or meaning of the image”: self-awareness, the awareness of identity as a being created in the image and likeness of God. However, the most profound and most comprehensive meaning of this fulfilment is found in the teachings

of the Church Fathers, especially in the writings of St. Maximus the Confessor and in the reflections of St. Dumitru Stăniloae. In the introduction to the third volume of the Romanian Philocalia, the author outlines the eight stages of human growth in theosis—that is, in spiritual resurrection and fulfilment. These stages can be summarized as follows: Thought or mind – man’s face, his true manifestation as a spiritual being. The mind becomes a mirror reflecting the glory of the Logos within himself and in creation, like a new Moses who sees the face of God. Withdrawal of the mind from feeling, through the spirit, to make room for the material and passionate darkness of the human being, preparing it for union with the divine. The struggle for deliverance – from all material impurity and the patterns of the old world, to restore human nature to its original state and to regain reason and mind as organs of union with God. The active restoration of the human being—renewing reason and inner wisdom, reestablishing the channel of communication with the divine. Rational perception – in the soul, where the concrete experience of living in the divine light and the divine reason of the world is revealed. This marks the first victory of the spirit in man, encountering divine truth’s light. Natural contemplation is a form of simple, intuitive, non-deductive knowledge, a spiritual perspective on the world, and a view of divine reality that emphasizes clarity and simplicity of understanding. Mystical death or complete sabbath – renouncing positive knowledge of God in favour of total emptiness, cleansing the being of all created content to be filled solely by God. Attainment of the shining state – when the soul becomes a transparent conduit for divine energy, the “shining medium of divine energies,” thus making the human being a true temple of divinity (Stăniloae 2017, 14-20).

This process not only concludes at the individual level but also extends to the entirety of human existence. The one who reaches this state of spiritual elevation no longer lives in isolation but gradually partakes in “an aerial world” (Stăniloae 2017, 20), bathed in the light of Christ, which is also a supernatural reality full of peace and divine love. St. Gregory Palamas describes this state when he says: “This is the integral man, the total person – body, soul, and spirit together – participating in the display of divine light, for the divine energies transfigure not only our inner being but also our physicality” (Ware 1996, 59). Therefore, the concept of the “total person” in the teachings of the Church Fathers is not without theological basis: it is the unity realized between the spirit, the divine breath, and the physical nature of the body. In this ultimate unity, man becomes an icon of God, an “*imago Dei*” in the most profound sense, reflecting the image of God, Christ, within his being. In this context, as St. Maximus states, man has

ascended to the height of participating in divinity. To be in the likeness of God means, therefore, to live this union, this solidarity of all levels of being, by “being in the image” of God.

This lived experience of the human being as a “temple of God”—as a forgetting of limitations and as a manifestation of the fact that man, in all his aspects, becomes a fuller reflection of the divine dimension—is the goal of the highest and final stage in the theology of obedience and sanctification. Throughout this process, biblical revelation points us to the understanding that the terms “in our image” and “in our likeness” are not merely traditional formulas, but rather indicators of an existential reality in which human creation, in all its complexity, must become a bearer and manifestation of the divine image. Thus, even if the human being retains a profound mystery – a mysterious, dependent relationship with God—this mystery does not remain just an enigma. Instead, it becomes a call to perfection, to ongoing renewal in the light of Christ, and active participation in divine life. In the rich patristic and theological perspective, man is not only “created in the image” but also “created to be like,” and this likeness is realized through the process of becoming, within the “eternal life” that begins already in this life.

This wisdom revealed by Scripture and deepened by patristic theology shows us, therefore, that man is called to total communion with God, a communion which involves not only the acceptance of Christ as Savior, but also the deepest and highest participation in the life of God – a becoming, in a sense, in the image and likeness of God in this life and the next. To be a person in the most authentic sense means to live in this relationship of love, of self-giving and sharing, thus becoming, truly becoming, “templum Dei” and the eternal reflection of divine light.

From Image to Face: filling creation with the Spirit and revealing the Face of God

In the revelations of the Old and New Testaments, a triad of divine persons is emphasized, each exemplifying the three core concepts mentioned: the image, the face, and the iconography of salvation, all aimed at the pneumatization of man and creation. This triad’s goal is to transform and renew both humanity and the world, shaping that “aerial world” of St. Maximus, *enaerios kosmos* – a reality where the Holy Spirit fills and harmonizes matter, not by consuming or destroying it, but by enriching it with divine life – the pleasant fragrance of the Spirit, a marvel of spiritual elevation. The principal figures representing this triad are Jacob-Israel, Moses, and Jesus Christ. Jacob, who bears

the name Israel, meaning “he who wrestles with God,” signifies the process of growth and spiritual struggle to become like God. Moses, as the bearer of the Law, symbolizes self-awareness and the gift of the Law, eternally inscribed on the “fleshly tablets of our hearts,” embedded in the deep structure of human nature. Finally, Jesus Christ, the God-Man, embodies the highest expression of divine freedom, grace, and the culmination of revelation: He is the perfect icon of God, unveiling the fullness of the mystery of salvation. Spiritual growth involves ongoing effort, as seen in the Peniel episode (Gn 32), alongside deep self-awareness reinforced by the divine law written in the heart. At the same time, true freedom is not dependent on birth or circumstances but on divine grace—the presence of Christ in the heart—which transforms the soul into a temple of heavenly light. The mystery of the divine face is revealed in Christ, because through Him, all these aspects are fulfilled: the divine image, self-knowledge, and spiritual freedom. St. Justin Popovich asserts that Christ, by being born of His deity, simplifies the entire salvation to this act of divine birth, which causes all who are born to be fashioned after His image: “The Lord Christ reduces the whole iconomy of salvation to the birth from His deity - *ek tis avtou Theotitos* — from the very seed of deity, because in the sons who are born of the seed of Christ Christ is imagined/formed, modeled – *emorfoti* – Christ” (St. Justin Popovich 2014, 153). Thus, the human soul ultimately becomes a space of encounter between God and creation, between image and face, between icon and reality, where the Holy Spirit penetrates and renews the heavenly image, transforming it into the fragrant goodness of divinity. In this view, actual spiritual “growth” and “freedom” are rooted in the presence and work of the Spirit, through Christ, within the soul and the world at large.

The Mystery of the Face of God – renewal and likeness in the Holy Spirit

The mystery of God’s image and face is one of the deepest and most profound aspects of divine revelation. It is fundamentally an effort to understand and explore the nature of the intimate relationship between God and humanity. This mystery cannot be fully uncovered if we limit ourselves to analysing external forms, sounds, and symbols that accompany its verbal or visual expressions. Searching for a superficial or formal meaning only narrows our ability to grasp divine truths. Instead, a deep exploration—an investigation of divine meanings and hidden truths within scriptural texts—requires going beyond appearances and the boundaries of language and form to uncover the true significance of these concepts, especially concerning the face and Image.

The presence of Christ within the human signifies both a restoration of God's face and a transformation of the heart. During renewal, the human being enters a state of complete rebirth, being united with the Trinity. This act of transfiguration and renewal does not eliminate individuality or the unique divine-human nature but rather elevates it, guiding it toward "a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13). In this state, the individual becomes, in a mysterious way, a reflection of divine life—both human and divine—forming a more profound unity between creation and the Creator. From this viewpoint, the concepts of image and likeness acquire a new meaning: they no longer refer to external appearance or simple comparison but to a profound reality—an act of restorative reciprocity where the *panim*, the face of God, becomes shared by both God and man. This is achieved through the work of the Holy Spirit, who enters the soul and mind, renewing and transforming them into the divine image. In this relationship, God's face is no longer just a symbol or theological idea but a living, active reality that becomes visible and perceptible within the inner being of the transformed person.

An essential element in this process is the wisdom and self-awareness that crystallize in obedience to the divine law, not as an external constraint, but as a reflection of the fact that man has received a new identity through the Word of God. This means that man, because of the process of becoming deified, no longer lives separately from God, but becomes a reflection of the divine work in the material world. At the same time, this union does not erase man's unique character but transforms him, enabling him to participate in the mystery and communion of the divine.

The mystery of God's face is most deeply revealed in Christ, who not only bears the image and face of the Father but also, through His incarnation, makes it possible for every human being to be like God. In Him, who is the perfect image of the Father, this idea of divine iconomy is fulfilled, through whom the human can attain complete likeness to God. St. Justin Popovich affirms that, from His birth from deity, Christ reduces the entire salvation to this birth, to this birth from His deity, highlighting the fundamental role of union with Him in the process of human transformation. This union with Christ, from a theological perspective, achieves what we can call the "renewal of the image" in the human soul. As man conforms himself and consciously and willingly participates in the grace of salvation, the divine image is rekindled and transformed, and the face of God—that is, the divine presence and light—becomes an integral part of his being.

In this union, the soul becomes the “place” where the divine presence is manifested and where the work of restoration is carried out.

According to Orthodox teaching, this state of human transformation is also reflected in how man experiences and perceives reality: the soul becomes a “temple of the Holy Spirit,” and this transformation works silently and continuously within it. In this process, man no longer needs to seek external expressions of his identity but lives in direct contact with the face of God, in the light and glory of the divine presence. Therefore, the profound meaning of the image and face of God is to represent the real and living presence and likeness of God within the human being as a work of the Holy Spirit. *Panim*, or the divine face, becomes for the Christian an “oasis” of light, a guiding encounter in the search for truth, life, and divine communion. From this perspective, God’s face and Image are not just symbols of divine relationship with humanity but the living manifestation of divine love, which brings life and renewal to the human being, granting him his identity: that of a child of God, made in His image and likeness.

Conclusions

The study highlights the profound significance of the relationship between the image and the face of God in biblical and patristic theological thought. Without reducing these symbols to mere externals, it is emphasized that they are living, participatory, and dynamic realities, expressing the ultimate and highest goal of human existence: likeness to God.

In the process of pneumatization and spiritual renewal, man not only bears the divine image but also realizes it through the work of the Holy Spirit, in a continual touch of divine love and presence in his heart. Spiritual transformation is not just personal evolution but active and conscious participation in Trinitarian life, culminating in complete and authentic union with God. On an ontological level, man becomes “*imago Dei*” in a tangible form, called to live as a “*templum Dei*,” a sacred place where the divine presence is made concrete and visible.

This transfiguring union does not destroy individuality but rather divinizes and fulfils it in love, becoming a reflection of divine light. From this perspective, the image and the face of God become symbols of a living and participatory reality, and man’s destiny is to return to his divine origin in love and truth.

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