

Making the Invisible Visible: A Protestant Encounter with Icons

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Over the past year a number of American museums have been host to a remarkable exhibition of Russian icons. “Gates of Mystery: The Art of Holy Russia” has visited Baltimore, Princeton, Dallas, Memphis, and Chicago, the latter its final U.S. stop before it concludes in London.¹

The art shown in the exhibit is exquisite. The art of the icon fails in its intention, however, if it does not lead the viewer from delight in the finite beauty of the icon to an encounter with the infinite, transcendent source of all beauty—the triune God. Icons are intended to serve as objects before whom the faithful pray. To see icons in a “show” is inevitably to view them out of their natural element.

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of icons in Orthodox faith. In the case of Russia, icons were instrumental in its becoming an Orthodox nation. In 988 Vladimir I of Kiev, after examining Judaism, Catholicism, and Islam, made Orthodoxy the religion of his realm, and one of his primary reasons for doing so was grounded in a revelatory valuation of religious art. Upon visiting the Hagia Sophia church in Constantinople, Vladimir’s ambassadors had reported: “We went to the Greeks, and the Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty and we are at a loss to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men.”

“Gates of Mystery” is composed of 96 works. One of them is considered to be as early as the 11th century, but the majority come from the 15th century and after. Most of the works in the exhibit are paintings, although a number of tapestries and low-relief paneled carving in wood and ivory are also included. Some of the later icons are adorned with precious metals, and several are made entirely of such metals—for example, a magnificent late 16th-century crucifix reminiscent of medieval Limoges enamels.

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During the xenophobic Stalin era the seemingly self-evident influence of Byzantine art on Russian art was minimized and even denied. Old Russian art was treated by Soviet art historians as completely isolated from Byzantium. Such Marxist lunacy cast a pall on the whole of Russian art history. Analysis of the various schools within Russian art—e.g., Novgorod vs. Moscow—was the only permissible focus of Soviet art scholarship. However, over the past several decades the role of Russian art in the larger context of Byzantine culture has been freely acknowledged.

What is immediately apparent to the non-expert is not the subtle differences in the various Russian schools but the astonishing overall unity. The drastic evolution of



art styles in Western Europe—from Romanesque to the Baroque—over the six centuries covered in the “Gates of Mystery” simply did not take place in Russian art. To be sure, by the 16th century a “stylistic mutation” began to occur under the inevitable influences of Western naturalism and linear perspective. Semen Spiridonov Kholmogorets's *Christ Pantokrator Enthroned* (ca. 1682) appears to be reaching in the same direction as the work of the Italian painter Duccio more than 350 years earlier—evidencing a curious convergence from different ends of the historical perspective. Still employing the Byzantine style, Duccio achieved a certain anatomical and spatial realism and emotional force which was to influence the

Italian Renaissance. By the time Renaissance influence finally reached Russia, Kholmogorets, perhaps unconsciously, appropriated elements of that movement into his own Byzantine style. Nevertheless, the overall sensibility of the icon is far closer to the Byzantine tradition than to the Renaissance. The same, of course, can be said for Duccio's work.

This remarkable perseverance of the Byzantine genius well into the modern period is attributable in part to the fact that the making of icons has long been governed by the Orthodox Church's canons of iconography. Although not merely copyists, icon painters, in the words of critic Michel Quenot, “must learn to communicate and translate their faith, conveying it by their talent.” As such the making of icons is the result not primarily of the artist's personal creativity or imagination but of his or her talent rigorously subordinated to the holy subject.

The function of icons in the Orthodox tradition is not to bathe churches in an aura of amorphous mystery, nor are the paintings mere instructional devices for illustrating sacred stories. Rather, the icon (from *Eikon*, the Greek word for “image”) is intended to reflect invisible realities so as to make them visible. Just as the eternal and invisible Christ became temporal and visible for us in the incarnation, so in icon

eneration the divinity of Christ becomes manifest to the worshiper through the Holy Spirit in the beauty of the icon's portrayal of Christ. And not only Christ: in the iconographic rendering of the Virgin Mary or the saints the deifying effects of Christ's incarnation are also portrayed. To use a term from Paul Tillich, the iconographical image "participates" in the ontological reality toward which it points, and thereby the eternal and invisible is revealed in the beauty of the earthly icon.

A frank Neoplatonism informs the Orthodox theology of icons. The world as it appears is not the "really real" but an image of the ideal from which it is derived. To copy the world as it appears would thus be to copy a copy. From a Neoplatonic perspective, true art must go beyond mere appearances to the essential reality that informs and forms all appearances.

Even more fundamental to Orthodox iconography is its unshakable Chalcedonian Christology and its concomitant theology of deification—the eternal second person of the Godhead became what we are so that he might make us what he himself is. Obviously, our destiny unto divinity is not apparent to our natural eyes. Neither our created origins nor our redeemed destiny in deification accords with the mundane appearance of things; thus in recording the acts of God the icon abstracts radically from the appearances of the so-called "real world."

To be sure, since God became human, the icon must picture human beings—faces, arms, bodies. The icons of traditional Orthodox incarnational faith cannot be purely abstract. Nevertheless, Orthodox art acutely stylizes its renderings of the human figure. The outline of the figures is pronounced; color is not modeled but is used to fill in the outlined figure so as to produce a quite flat, volumeless form. Such "dematerialized" figures are symbols of our deified state in the kingdom of heaven



which flesh and blood cannot inherit—where our bodies will be recreated in the pure spirituality of divinity.

Likewise, the icon's "space" is not the "scientific" linear perspective of the Renaissance tradition. In the icon either the figures are pushed to the foreground in which all is surface and in a sense there is no room for depth—as in the case of the striking early 15th-century shroud *The Entombment*—or each figure is painted in its own perspective. By being rendered diffusely space is thus minimized as each object freely extends itself to the spectator and is not rigidly held in a spatial structure.

The Renaissance achievement of rigidly organized spatial structures was of no value to the icon maker who sought to actualize the spacelessness and timelessness of eternity directly. Byzantine art stands in marked tension with the stylistic conventions

of the high Renaissance, with its monumental human figures rendered in linear perspective—a style that dominated Western art from the 16th through the 19th centuries. It has been the habit of Western art critics to view Byzantine art as a tradition waiting to be supplanted by the humanism and emergent scientism of the Renaissance and its outgrowths.

Curiously, however, 20th-century art, whether abstract, expressionistic, surrealist or primitive, reflects a totally different understanding of reality than that of the Renaissance. The ordered space of Filippo Brunelleschi, the inventor of unified linear perspective, foretold the Newtonian “scientific” certitude of absolute space and time. In a post-Newtonian universe what once passed for naturalism and scientific perspective seems not to be “objective” reflections of the “real” but subjective impositions of a particular worldview upon nature. Undeniably, the Renaissance tradition produced much great art. However, its underlying assumption that truth is to be found in or through the appearance of things no longer seems viable in a post-Einsteinian world. The ultimate nature of things as described, for example, by astrophysicists does not accord with naïve appearances or even with a common sense view of reality.

All of which is not to suggest that the icon’s day has returned. Icons are far too Christian for the aesthetically elite in our postmodern world. Still, an awareness of what modern art has been up to might help Protestants to grasp the theology that informs the Byzantine style. The icon is not some primitively beautiful but crude attempt at realism any more than modern art is the work of artists too clumsy to draw nice pictures. As an expression of the highest religious and cultural sophistication, the icon deserves a sophisticated theological response, yea or nay. In its veneration of icons Orthodoxy is attempting to discharge a universal ecclesiastical obligation.

One of the most fundamental responsibilities of the Christian church is to strive, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to nurture in its midst awareness of the living presence of Jesus Christ. As we’ve seen, Orthodoxy responds to this responsibility by creating a context in which through the beauty of icons the worshiping community can participate in the transcendent realities that the icons symbolize. Classical Protestantism with its iconoclastic impulse has produced very little significant religious art of a visual nature. Its creativity has generally been directed toward more abstract modes of nurturing the presence of Christ, chiefly words and music. To be sure, Orthodoxy also has fine music, which in a broad sense it regards as having an iconographic function. Moreover, Orthodoxy has an unsurpassable theological tradition. But it is in its liturgy and icons, not in its preaching, historicizing or intellectualizing, that Orthodoxy most fundamentally seeks to nurture the presence of Jesus Christ.

In an era in which many more Protestants knew their Bibles and when Protestant scholarship often served great Protestant preaching, a word-centered rationalist theological tradition issued in a highly activist sense of Jesus Christ's presence in the world. The action of the transcendent and holy God in history, particularly in the history of the man Jesus, demanded that we act in obedient response to God's initiatives. If for the Orthodox Jesus Christ was known in the beauty of concrete images, for the Protestant he was known in the more abstract proclamation of the word through preaching and sacraments which became concrete in the worldly vocations of believers.

While many Protestants remain trinitarian, their ever-increasing secularity makes the nurture of the presence of the living Jesus Christ problematic. In the early part of this century the liberal hope of realizing Christ's presence through historical criticism still seemed somehow possible. The naiveté of that hope is now all too apparent. The effect of historical criticism taken as a whole has been to call into question all hope of ever arriving at a generally agreed upon transgenerational picture of Jesus. The "postmodern" suspicion is that, despite the historian's learning and his or her desire to be objective, the very nature of history is such that all it can ever finally be is an extended articulation of the historian's own faith or lack thereof stimulated by texts and artifacts from the past—the "actual" past being dead and gone.

In our postmodern context in which there is less and less confidence in historic certainties, the temptation is to despair of the truth or the reality of things altogether. But to believe in icons is to believe in the greater reality that they reflect. Thus the icon painter would never be tempted to conclude, in nihilistic postmodern fashion, that the unreliability of mere appearances means that there is no truth. The truth is real, but it can finally be grasped only in images through the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Whether one tries to nurture the living presence of Jesus Christ through abstract and speculative preaching or through concrete but speculative images, Jesus Christ will not be manifest to us except through a miracle of the Spirit. This much Orthodoxy and classic Protestantism have in common.

I don't know where the present state of affairs is leading other Protestants, but I'm trying to learn how to venerate icons and not just to appreciate their beauty. I suspect that it is only in some such pursuit that one can hope to get back to the "real" Jesus Christ.