

11:33), mysterious things that cannot be grasped and understood by those who come from, who are, and who return to dust (Gen. 2:7; 3:19; Pss. 103:14; 104:29; Job 34:15), things of God that while they may be experienced by human beings nevertheless cannot be explained:

For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.
How great are your works, O Lord!
Your thoughts are very deep! (Ps. 92:4f.)

Prayer, for the major part of the Old Testament, is a humble asking, a supplicating of God, and not bearing within it any sense of presumption that what is being asked for will necessarily be given. When intercessors make their prayers for others in their distressing situations, frequently it is their situations of weakness and powerlessness that are emphasized before God. The mercy of God is sought for such people, and thus it was that Amos, for example, prayed for the people of Israel,

How can Jacob stand?
He is so small! (Amos 7:2, 5)

Yet what for the Old Testament is perhaps the greatest wonder concerning what happens when a person prays is that the prayer *is* heard by God. The wonder is that prayer is made by human beings and yet it is heard by God (Isa. 38:5), even answered by

him (Ps. 65:2). What is remarkable is that human beings can have access, so to speak, to God, the one who is far beyond us, and bring to his almighty and divine notice their concerns, either those of their own lives or those of others. Moreover, the fact that the Old Testament can affirm that from time to time God changes his mind about this matter or that, bears its own testimony to a belief that there are occasions when something does happen at what is believed to be the highest level of the Universe. That is, in prayer the person of earth, however humble they may be, is enabled to gain a hearing at the highest and most exalted level of all, and may moreover even gain a change of some sort in their current situation.

Nevertheless this is not a matter that is to be taken for granted, but is itself a particular subject for prayer to God, as both the Deuteronomistic historian and the Chronicler have Solomon make it at the dedication of the temple.

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house, the place of which you said, 'My name shall be there', that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays towards this place. (1 Kings 8:27-29; cf. 2 Chron. 6:18-20)

The Sacred Icon in the Contemporary World



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Introduction

DURING the past century the icon, the sacred art of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and its theological importance has begun to be re-discovered by the Western Church. However, controversy remains amongst Christians in the West about the use and role of the icon. The concern of some Christians is that icons are a form of idolatry, for others the root of their opposition is centred on christological issues. Generally there is a lack of understanding about the meaning of the veneration of the icon of Christ in relation to the doctrine of

the Incarnation. Like Constantine V in the eighth century, some in the Western Church today argue that the veneration of icons is not just idolatry but heresy. The main christological concern continues to be that an iconic depiction, of Christ either presents Him as a mere man or attempts to present His divine nature and in doing so circumscribes his divinity. There are those today who would fully support the declaration of the Iconoclast Council of AD 754 which stated that the veneration of icons was against the teaching of Holy Scripture and was inspired by the devil: 'Satan misguided

men, so that they worshipped the creature instead of the Creator.¹

There is, however, a positive view of the role and meaning of icons which has been present from the very early years of the Church, but which has remained predominantly within the teaching of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Overall, this view believes the icon can assist individuals to encounter the divine and become more God-like (theosis). This approach reflects the teaching of the seventh century Quinisext Council which identified what was acceptable in terms of the content of sacred images, formulated the dogmatic basis for its use, and identified a set of criteria by which to judge the 'liturgical quality of a sacred image. This Council's statement notes that the painting of Christ in human form is to be understood as 'the elevation of the humility of God the Word, and we are led to remembering His life in the flesh, His passion, His saving death and thus, deliverance which took place for the world'.² This was further confirmed by the Seventh Ecumenical Council in AD 780 which clarified the theological basis and meaning of the icon. The overall aim of the Council was to show that the icon gives further confirmation, 'that the becoming man of the Word of God was real and not just imaginary'.³ The Council's deliberation spells out clearly that icons can help individuals in their spiritual growth. 'We kiss and offer the veneration of honour to the divine form of the cross and to the venerable icons, because we are moved by a desire and affection to reach the prototypes'.⁴ The function of the icon is described as equal to that of the gospel, 'Thus, as when we receive the sound of the reading with our ears, we transmit it to our mind, so by looking with our eyes at the painted icons, we are enlightened in our mind'.

Rediscovering the Icon

Today, authentic icons of Orthodoxy can be viewed in public art galleries, museums and special exhibitions. Copies of icons are available for purchase at

affordable prices to the public. A variety of books have been written on the theological and artistic aspects of the icon. People from all walks of life, believers and unbelievers alike, are attracted to icons. Workshops on icons covering the spiritual preparation of the iconographer, the artistic techniques used, as well as studying the meaning of icons, are offered at some Retreat Centres. In Britain public observation of Orthodox iconographers at work is possible in Walsingham at the small Russian Orthodox Church.

The renewed interest in the icon both for its artistic qualities and spiritual meaning is commented on by Daniel Sahas who states that in, 'an age of rationalism and industrial domination there is an underlying question for a language which includes symbolism and spiritual categories'. The icon can provide this language 'because of its antinomical nature and its otherworldliness'.⁵ Whether for religious or purely aesthetic reasons icons can lift the human spirit from the darkness of human despair, pain and suffering. Far from being a relic of the past the icon is a tool through which the modern world can rediscover the meaning of the God-human relationship in which God is at the centre of human existence and show the possibility of us becoming more God-like (*theosis*). The icon has an essential role to play in helping overcome the increasing 'discord and disintegration' present in the world which has been caused through a human obsession with technological and scientific progress as well as material fulfilment often achieved with disregard to human life.⁷

The Icon: a Testimony to Theosis

From the early teachings and still today in the Eastern Orthodox Church, through its approach to catechesis, the role which the icon plays is identified as confirming the faith of the believer and providing insights into how we can be transformed into being God-like (*theosis*).⁸ Ouspensky notes that the rediscovery of the icon is not important because the icon 'is now appreciated and understood to a greater or lesser extent, but in the witness it offers to con-

¹ Medieval Source Book@www.fordham.edu/ha/sall/ accessed Dec. 2000.

² Ibid.

³ N. P. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. 1 (Georgetown: Sheed & Ward, 1990), p. 135.

⁴ D. J. Sahas, *Icon and the Logos: Sources in Eighth Century Iconoclasm* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 109.

⁵ Ibid., p. 61.

⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

⁷ L. Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, Vol. 2 (New York: St Vladimir's Press, 1992), p. 463.

⁸ A. C. Vrame, *The Educating Icon* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999).

temporary man'.⁹ This witness is to another way of life, another vision of the world, that aims to create unity and harmony rather than discord and disintegration. The icon, has a role to play in helping to heal the world. The icon of Christ in particular portrays the perfect model of the divine-human union and is witness to another way of living. The purpose of the icon serves not only for our ascent to Heaven, but also for the descent of Heaven to earth. A con-temporary iconographer explains how the painting of Orthodox icons follows certain symbolism that carries a message of the Divine:

The eyes of an icon are made large and animated because they have seen great things. The ears are also made large to hear the commands of the Lord. The nose is made long and thin, therefore it doesn't smell the things of this world, only spiritual fragrances. The mouth is small, since there is less importance on physical food and more importance on spiritual food, the Word of God.¹⁰

A contemporary Greek scholar of iconography, Fotis Kontoglou, writes that icons aim to elevate the individual 'to the mystical world of faith'.¹¹ Victor Bychkov, a Byzantium scholar, states that the icon brings the believer mentally and spiritually into contact with the archetype.¹² Therefore, theosis, becoming God-like, acquiring holiness, is shown through the icon not to be an impossible task for human beings.

All icons whether of Christ, the Theotokos, Apostles or Saints assist in this understanding of the achievable goal of theosis. The icon is a symbolic interpretation of the spiritual qualities of the person portrayed and illuminates his/her holiness. Through prayer and meditation the believer can participate in this holiness. Orthodox theology teaches that a distinction exists between the Essence and Energies within the Uncreated God and it is the energies of God which can be mysteriously imparted to humankind. These divine energies transform and sanctify human beings by making them partakers of the divine nature. The icon is a means through which

the divine energies can be communicated to humankind.

The Icon: Confronting the Anthropocentrism of a Secularized World

Orthodox scholars such as Alexander Schmemmann and Leonoid Ouspensky speak of secular and materialistic ideologies having the capacity to diminish human beings into broken divided beings. This broken divided humanity is not only a distortion of what it means to be human according to God's eternal plan but it denies being made in the image of God.¹³ The consequence that, 'Our daily life is dominated by what is false, fifth rate, and also by a fragmentation that leads to decomposition in all areas. The result is a loss of physical and spiritual harmony.'¹⁴ The material progress of humankind which leaves God out of the equation has meant that, 'the spiritualization of man's animal life is replaced by a bestialization of his spirit'.¹⁵ The argument which is being made is that an anthropocentrism which puts humankind and not God at the centre of all things diminishes the capacity of human beings to connect with God and help make more manifest the Divine Kingdom on earth. The icon assists in overcoming this God-less anthropocentrism by helping human beings to discern God within themselves. Vladimir Lossky writes, 'If man is in the image of the Logos, everything which touches the destiny of man – grace, sin, redemption by the Word made man – must also be related to the theology of the image.'¹⁶

The essential point is that an encounter with the divine can develop awareness within the individual of another way of living which heals 'the divided human being', and reverses the bestialization of the human spirit. This encounter nurtures the human capacity to choose good as opposed to evil and seek to sustain life not to destroy it. Nicolas Zernov presents icons as a source of hope when he describes them as 'pledges of the coming victory of a redeemed creation over the fallen one', because the icon is a reflection of 'the celestial glory', and it is 'a concrete

⁹ Op. cit., Ouspensky, p. 480.

¹⁰ T. Tsagalakis, *Windows into Heaven*, www.thyra.com/Tsagalakis/ accessed June 2001.

¹¹ F. Kontoglou, *Ekphrasis tes Orthodoxou eikographias* (Athens, 1979), p. 1.

¹² V. Bychkov, *The Aesthetic Face of Being* (New York: St Vladimir's Press, 1993), p. 80.

¹³ A. Schmemmann, 'Can One be a Believer, Being Civilized', in *Messenger de l'ACER*, no. 107 (1974), pp. 145–52.

¹⁴ Op. cit., Ouspensky, p. 478.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 478.

¹⁶ V. Lossky, 'La Theologie de l'Image', in *Messenger de l'Exarchat du Patriarce Russe en Europe, Occidentale*, nos 30–31 (1959), p. 123.

example of matter restored to its original harmony and beauty, and serving as a vehicle of the Spirit'.¹⁷ Pavel Florensky clarified the pivotal meaning of the icon not only in the Church but also in the home when he noted that an icon was not merely part of the furnishings and decoration, 'it was the vivifying soul of the house, its spiritual centre, a mentally conceivable axis around which the whole house turned'.¹⁸

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to show the icon as having a role both within and outside the Church in helping contemporary humankind to understand that there is an alternative way of living in the world which strives to overcome the disunity and fragmentation that causes so much human tragedy and suffering. The icon communicates something of the Divine which on the one hand enlightens and comforts us but can also be a turbulent force in challenging our views about life and how we live it. Icons communicate a unity between the material and the spiritual which is essential for the broken, divided human being to be healed and thereby help to create

¹⁷ N. Zernov, *The Russians and their Church* (London: SPCK, 1963), pp. 107–108.

¹⁸ P. Florensky, *Iconostasis* (New York: St Vladimir's Press, 1997), p. 68.

a world in which the quest for peace, justice and unity predominates over the values and activities which divide, dehumanize and destroy.

... icons change you from within because they are a prayer. They will at times create an atmosphere inside you to receive something new from God . . . I've thought a lot about this connection between our lives and the lives of the heavenly images icons place before us. What you gaze at you become. Not only what you hear and listen to, but what you see. We will spend hours in front of the television, kind of the new icon that we gaze at, and it glares back at us . . . We need to gaze at truly loving images . . . gaze at something that wants to bring us close to God.¹⁹

However, the question remains about the extent to which iconic knowing and living is possible in the world today. The answer to this is contained within the icon itself. The men and women portrayed demonstrate that throughout human history, in different geographical locations and cultural contexts, the possibility of iconic knowing and living is possible. Through the work of the Holy Spirit the icon can help people to gain a deeper understanding of what it means for our everyday life to be created in the image and likeness of God.

¹⁹ W. H. McNichols, 'The Holy Icon', in *America Magazine*, October 1998.

On Paul

TEN essays for various publications, together with a new one and an introduction, have been brought together by C. K. Barrett in *On Paul: Essays on his Life, Work and Influence in the Early Church* (London: Continuum/T&T Clark, 2003. £25.00. pp. xii + 208. ISBN 0-567-08902-9). Most pieces date from the 1990s, and the earliest is from 1970. Although they are on diverse themes, they form a coherent package rather well defined in the subtitle. In more than one essay we are brought back to Galatians 2, Acts 15 and the so-called Apostolic Council as a crucial place where the uneasily co-existing early theologies may be detected. Thus we see Paul as the radical (though not exactly the Paul of the 'New Perspective'), certain Jerusalem Christians as the conservative opponents, and the proponents of the 'Apostolic Decree' as the middle way, a way which turned out to prevail in the medium term at least. There is much on related issues (including the Epistle to the Hebrews) all treated with the scholarly determination to follow the evidence rather than propose daring hypotheses that we should expect.

This is clearly a book by a doyen of scholars for other scholars and for research students. Even very bright senior undergraduates will have difficulty in using this volume unless they are competent in German and Latin as well as in Greek, because key parts of an argument are at times stated in these languages, untranslated. This seems a pity, as they could learn much about how serious biblical study is done from this book.

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