

# TRADITION AND THE ICON

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ICONS ARE, QUITE OBVIOUSLY, a traditional form of religious art. They are painted according to traditional methods, which are jealously preserved; even the slightest deviation from these traditions—using oil-based paints instead of egg tempera, for example—is fiercely resisted. One suspects that people like them because they are ‘traditional’—in the debased sense of being familiar, safe, unchallenging. Though they clearly originate in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, icons can be found almost anywhere nowadays. Many Western churches have icons, sometimes as a focus for devotion in a chapel set apart for prayer, often together with the reserved sacrament.

This state of affairs in the West is, however, quite recent. It is not that long ago that icons were thought of by most Westerners, if they knew anything about them at all, as ‘traditional’ in another sense: part of an old-fashioned, static culture that the ‘birth of Western painting’, the glories of the Renaissance, and all that followed had superseded. Their more recent popularity is perhaps of a piece with that of objects of art from many other ‘traditional’ cultures—Asian, African and American. The attraction these exert today could be interpreted in a variety of ways: a yearning for the exotic; the affluent West’s nostalgia for lost certainties and simplicities; the denizens of a jaded, technological culture being fascinated by the naïve.

When, therefore, we say that icons are ‘traditional’, ‘tradition’ is a shifting, not to say a shifty, term. Indeed the question arises: is such talk helpful at all? In what follows, I want firstly to look at how Orthodox Christianity understood the relationship between icons and tradition. Then I want to explore what the ‘tradition’ into which icon painters are initiated amounts to—a more complex question than many suspect. In doing so, I shall raise some more general questions about tradition and art, questions that exercised Hans Urs von Balthasar throughout his life.



### ***The Orthodox Tradition of Icons***

Let us start by going back to the Seventh Œcumenical Council held in Nicaea in 787. This gathering, against the objections of the iconoclasts, declared icons and their veneration a part of the tradition of the Church. One of the iconoclasts' objections was that the cult of icons entailed objects of veneration, means of access to the holy, being subjected to the mere imagination of the painter. Icons, they complained, were not even consecrated. Later Orthodox practice has removed the latter objection by providing ceremonies of consecration of icons, which are, especially in the Russian tradition, of some solemnity and complexity. But the Fathers of the Council had no problem with the fact that icons were not consecrated:

Many of the sacred things which we have at our disposal do not need a prayer of sanctification, since their name says that they are all-sacred and full of grace ....<sup>1</sup>

They gave as examples the cross (both the sign and images of the cross) and sacred liturgical vessels. Icons, making the sign of the cross, images of the cross, sacred vessels—all these are holy because of what they are. Ultimately, St John Damascene argued they are holy because they are made of matter that is holy, having come from the hands of the creator, and because they refer to the people and events through which salvation has been worked:

I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked.<sup>2</sup>

This did not, however, mean that the imagination of the artist was to be regarded as the creative source of sacred objects—that iconoclast accusation, at least, the Fathers were keen to reject:

... the making of icons is not an invention of the painters but an accepted institution and tradition of the Catholic Church.

The making of icons and the practice of placing them in churches go back to the teaching of the Fathers. It was they,

... who, having built venerable churches, set up icons in them and offered inside them prayers to God and bloodless sacrifices which are accepted by Him, the Master of all. The idea, therefore, and the tradition are theirs [that is, the Fathers'], not the painters'. Only the art is the painters', whereas the disposition is certainly that of the Holy Fathers who built the churches.<sup>3</sup>

What makes an icon an icon is not the imagination and skill of the artist, but the fact that he or she is following the tradition of the

<sup>1</sup> Nicaea II, Session 6, quoted from Daniel J. Sahas, *Icon and Logos. The Sources of Eighth-Century Iconoclasm* (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1986), 99.

<sup>2</sup> St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, translated by Andrew Louth (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), I. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Nicaea II, Session 6 (*Icon and Logos*, 84).



*A mosaic from the sanctuary of S. Vitale in Ravenna. Here the hospitality of Abraham is related to the theme of the sacrifice of Isaac, both considered to prefigure the sacrifice of Christ.*

Catholic Church, a tradition that goes back through the Fathers to the Apostles.

This tradition, like virtually all liturgical traditions, was an unwritten one, and remained so for centuries: icon painters learnt from other icon painters, and the 'tradition' was passed on like a skill. Its character as tradition in the full theological sense was safeguarded by the 'reception' of the praying people of God. The iconographic tradition, or traditions, was certainly not immune from development; art historians have traced stylistic development and related these stylistic changes to changes in social perception and liturgical use. Not enough has yet been done to relate these changes to theology, though a remarkable exception to this claim is to be found in the book by the Catholic scholar and hermit Fr Gabriel Bunge, *Der andere Paraklet*,<sup>4</sup> which discusses the development of the depiction of Abraham's hospitality to his three angelic visitors, relating it to the developing exegesis of Genesis 18. Sometimes the scene is a theophany of the Word-to-become-incarnate, with the two accompanying angels providing an allusion to the doctrine of the Trinity; at other times it illustrates the three-in-oneness of the Godhead. Finally, in the

<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Bunge, *Der andere Paraklet* (Würzburg: Der Christliche Osten, 1994). My English translation is forthcoming (2007) from St Vladimir's Seminary Press. The pictures in the first part of this article illustrate Fr Gabriel's work.

atmosphere of Trinitarian devotion associated with St Sergii of Radonezh, there emerges the extraordinary and now famous icon of the Trinity, painted by St Andrei Rublev for the monastery of the Trinity founded by St Sergii. Fr Gabriel's research reveals how the rich liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church enabled an interaction between the devotional life of monastic icon painters such as St Andrei Rublev and the learned exegetical tradition that was probably in large part unknown to them.

In this account, the notion of 'tradition' is already beginning to diversify, if not unravel. There is Tradition in the full theological sense: the handing down of the message of the gospel in the Church, preserved and nurtured by the praying community that the Church is in the Spirit. This sense connects easily with traditions of scriptural exegesis and liturgical prayer. But then there is what looks more like a 'skills-tradition', handed down from artist to artist: conventions about how the figures and scenes are to be depicted; the whole elaborate procedure involved in preparing the panel with linen and gesso; the way and the order in which the layers of paint are applied, and so on. There are some very obvious links between the 'skills-tradition' and Tradition: the finished product of the artist's skill has a liturgical and devotional role to fulfil; conversely, ascetic demands such as prayer and fasting come to be made on the icon painter himself. Much, however, remains obscure, because the 'skills-tradition' of icon painting remained unwritten; it was passed on by word and example.

It is only well into the early modern period that written sources become available to us; the most famous Greek example of instructions for an icon painter, the *Hermeneia* (or 'painters' manual') of Dionysios of Fourna, belongs probably to the early 1730s. By then, the 'skills-tradition' of icon painting was already endangered; Dionysios wrote his *Hermeneia* to prevent it vanishing altogether. By the eighteenth century, icon painting in virtually all parts of the Orthodox world (apart from a few exceptions such as among the Old Believers in Russia) had been overwhelmed by the Western 'realism'. Naturalistic details were introduced, and even elements of the perspective that had been rediscovered at the Renaissance. People were beginning to depict the traditional scenes as historical events in the natural world, rather than as liturgical events drawing the beholder into the heavenly realm.



*Novgorod icon, roughly contemporary with St Andrei Rublev.  
Here the biblical scene has been simplified to concentrate on  
Abraham and Sarah's worship of the Trinity, symbolized by the  
three angels.*

In nineteenth-century Russian painting, realism and the icon traditions converge in a kind of meditative art: icon techniques lend an air of mystery to landscapes, while naturalist techniques are employed in the icon.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Restoring the Tradition***

From what has been said so far, it will be clear that the 'tradition' of icon painting, as we find it today throughout the Orthodox world and beyond, is *not* an unbroken tradition. The contemporary fondness for

<sup>5</sup> The development was richly illustrated in the exhibition *Russian Landscape in the Age of Tolstoy*, held at the National Gallery in London in summer 2004.

icons emerges, rather, from an attempt to *restore* a tradition that had been very nearly, if not entirely, lost.

‘Restoring’ a tradition is an odd business; it certainly involves some very untraditional activities. The story of how the tradition of icon painting was restored has yet to be told, and when it is told, it will reveal some surprises.

There were in the twentieth century apparently quite independent attempts within the different traditions of Orthodoxy to recover, restore, revive, the ‘tradition’ of icon painting. The famous names are Fotis Kontoglou (1895-1965) in Greece and Leonid Ouspensky (1902-1987) in the Russian diaspora in Paris—two people who never met, and did not even know of each other until 1949.<sup>6</sup> But as early as 1889, a synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church decreed that henceforth only icons in the ‘Byzantine style’ were to be used in churches and in homes, and that non-traditional icons were gradually to be withdrawn from use. There seem to have been various motives behind this restoration. Churches newly free from the Ottoman oppression wanted to rediscover their authentic identity. For their part, the Russian *émigrés* in Western Europe looked back on the Westernisation initiated by Peter the Great as a distortion of Russian Orthodox tradition and culture that had led to retribution in the shape of the Communist revolution; the distortion needed to be corrected. The resulting style of ‘traditional’ icon painting is not at all uniform; one could not mistake one of Kontoglou’s icons for one of Ouspensky’s. Nevertheless the icons emerging from this movement bear a family resemblance; they are what most modern Orthodox feel to be ‘traditional’.

### *The Meaning of Icons*

A monument to Ouspensky’s contribution is a book, first published in German in 1952, and then later in English with the title *The Meaning of Icons*. It is still one of the best introductions to the theological and religious significance of icons. The bulk of the book consists of short essays on the different types of Russian icon, relating the saint or the feast to the liturgical celebration of the Orthodox Church. There are also three introductory essays: one by Vladimir Lossky, the great

<sup>6</sup> See Kari Kotkavaara, *Progeny of the Icon: Émigré Russian Revivalism and the Vicissitudes of the Eastern Orthodox Sacred Image* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi UP, 1999), 338-339.

Orthodox theologian of the emigration in Paris, and two by Ouspensky himself.

Ouspensky's essays are directly about icons, their meaning and the technique of their making; Lossky's essay is called 'Tradition and traditions', and only mentions icons briefly towards the end. The placing of Lossky's article at the head of the work is very significant; it affirms the centrality of Tradition to any understanding of Orthodox icons, but in a very specific sense. Lossky is sharply conscious of the slipperiness of the term 'tradition':

Tradition ... is one of those terms which, through being too rich in meanings, runs the risk of finally having none.<sup>7</sup>

In his essay, Lossky seeks to get back beyond the idea of traditions and the traditional, and also back beyond the idea of tradition as a



*Rublev further simplifies the scene, in particular omitting the historical figures of Abraham and Sarah, so that the worshippers of the Trinity are now those who behold the icon.*



second source of Revelation, alongside Scripture, as the Council of Trent had understood the matter. For Lossky, Tradition is the whole life in God that the Incarnate Word has acquired for humanity through his death on the Cross, and passed on to his disciples. When we say that Tradition is ‘unwritten’, we are not saying that, though it might have been written, it remained the preserve of an esoteric elite. Rather we are saying that Tradition is inexhaustible. We experience it before we begin to understand it. It is not opposed to the written and spoken word; rather it is the silence in which that written and spoken word is uttered and understood. Lossky quotes St Ignatius of Antioch: ‘The one who possesses in truth the word of Jesus can hear even its silence’.<sup>7</sup> Tradition is a ‘margin of silence’ that surrounds the revealed word of Scripture—a ‘margin’ manifest, sometimes, in the difficulty Scripture poses to the understanding, the resistance to interpretation that compels the reader to read and reread, to meditate and pray. The icon is ‘traditional’ in belonging to the unwritten Tradition, which can be grasped only by being experienced, and then in no definitive and final manner.

Tradition, as Lossky sets it forth, is, like the Church itself, something that can never fail. The ‘tradition’ of icons may falter, but it can be recovered if the Church immerses itself again in Tradition, which is ever new. That ‘tradition’ is being taken in this deeper sense is perhaps hinted at in another feature of *The Meaning of Icons*, not generally noticed. Though most of the illustrations are of icons from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, there are three illustrations of modern icons, and scarcely anything in between: the rediscovered tradition is fitted seamlessly into the old ‘lost’ tradition.

#### *Tradition and the Individual Talent*

There are parallels in the Western culture of that period. Take, for instance, English poetry. It has sometimes been remarked that in his works of literary criticism and his championing of the literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods—the poetry of John Donne and George Herbert, the sermons of Lancelot Andrewes—T. S. Eliot was nurturing a critical atmosphere in which his own poetry could find

<sup>7</sup> Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, translated by G.E.H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Boston: Boston Book and Art Shop, 1969), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Ephesians*, 15:2, quoted by Lossky in *The Meaning of Icons*, 17.



*Our Lady of Tikhvin, nineteenth century*

appreciation. He, too, spoke in terms of 'tradition', and resurrected parts of the tradition of English literature that had long slumbered. What he wanted to erase from the memory was very much akin to the Westernisation that Ouspensky and Lossky wanted to erase from the tradition of the icon: an idiom emphasizing self-expression, of a kind that found its high-point in Romanticism. Instead, Eliot, Ouspensky and Lossky wanted to rehabilitate a more impersonal tradition, working through allusion to an

established canon of significant images. What Eliot was doing finds parallels throughout the Western European (and North American) cultural phenomenon known as 'modernism', which, despite its name, was, in many respects, an attempt to make contact with a tradition that was felt to be receding—receding, indeed, in a way that threatened the possibility of meaning altogether.

Those seeking to recover the tradition of iconography saw what they were doing in very similar terms. The ideas prevalent in the West—which had been responsible for the overlaying and obliteration of the icon tradition—seemed to be making the world descend into an abyss of meaninglessness. Many Orthodox thinkers thought that the Orthodox tradition had itself very nearly succumbed to this drift towards meaninglessness, but that there was still time to prevent it. This is, at one level, the force of Fr Georgii Florovsky's only major work, *The Ways of Russian Theology*. A more recent representative of this analysis is the Greek Orthodox thinker Christos Yannaras, whose

seminal works are at last finding English translators.<sup>9</sup> The rediscovery of the icon tradition can be seen as part of this wider movement.

This can also be seen in what it was that was emphasized about the icon tradition as it was rediscovered. First of all, the stress on the face or countenance in the icon. Faces are never shown in profile (save for figures like Judas); the faces characteristically look out of the icon. The face is emphasized in various ways. There are techniques that separate the area of the face (*lichnoe*, from the Slavonic *lik*, face) from the rest of the icon (*dolichnoe*, the part that leads up to the face). The *riza* of precious metal, that protects the icon when venerated, leaves the face and hands free, and thus emphasizes them.<sup>10</sup> The Greek word for face, *prosopon*, is also the word for person. The irreducibility of the person, rooted in the mystery of the three persons of the Godhead, has become a central concept in most twentieth-century Orthodox theology, as has the distinction between the person, defined by relationship, and the individual—the impersonal ‘unit’ to which human beings are reduced by modern society, an aspect of the encroaching meaninglessness of modern Western society—have. It may be that all this has its roots less in the Greek Fathers than in the Russian *émigrés*’ cult of the Slavonic and the Christian existentialism which they encountered in Paris. Nevertheless, the icon has profound theological and ethical significance, with the focus that it directs towards the face, and with the face-to-face encounter that takes place when people behold an icon. Fr Sergii Bulgakov may have been regarded by Florovsky as having succumbed to the West, but he too saw the icon as recalling values threatened by modern society and modern art; in particular, he too saw the erasing of the face in modern art as something profoundly inhuman, and pointed to the icon as resisting such a tendency.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See, most recently, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God*, edited by Andrew Louth and translated by Haralambos Ventis (London: T. and T. Clark, 2005); and *Postmodern Metaphysics*, translated by Norman Russell (Brookline, Ma: Holy Cross Orthodox, 2005). His *Orthodoxy and the West*, as yet unavailable in English, could be regarded as a Greek counterpart to Florovsky’s *Ways*.

<sup>10</sup> On this, see Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, translated by Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 135-136. Florensky also invokes the famous funerary portraits, then (1922) only recently discovered in the Egyptian Fayum, with their extraordinary focus on the face, as precursors of the Byzantine icon (see 160-165).

<sup>11</sup> The complex of ideas here recalls the central intuition of Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy in his concept of the countenance or ‘visage’—an influence on Olivier Clément’s meditations in *Le Visage intérieure* (Paris: Stock, 1978).

The rediscovery of the tradition of the icon involved, paradoxically, a serious attempt to avoid the associations of the more vulgar sense of 'tradition' that I mentioned earlier: tradition as the familiar, the safe and the unchallenging. It was precisely to this that the icon had been reduced by the incorporation of Western realism: Christ had become gentle and a bit ethereal, the Mother of God an attractive young woman.

The canons of traditional iconography do not lull us into such attitudes. The elongation of features and the use of reverse perspective evoke a strangeness, a sense that what is depicted is in some way lent from beyond; one is not at all tempted to admire the lifelikeness of the figures, the skill of the painter in that sense. This can be explained in bewilderingly different ways. It is important to recall that we have no authentic explanations of what the ancient iconographers thought they were up to.<sup>12</sup>

Fr Pavel Florensky wrote an essay that has now become famous on 'reverse perspective'. Its main concern is to demonstrate how 'true perspective' is a highly limited attempt to achieve certain absolutely abstract aims, rarely pursued with consistency even in post-Renaissance art. The effect is to reduce the world to a collection of objects to be possessed, the 'bitter Kantian fruits' of 'sweet Renaissance roots'.<sup>13</sup> In other words, it is 'true perspective' that limits what is depicted to something that we feel we can control; the 'reverse perspective' of the icon remains permanently unsettling, beyond our control, and capable of referring us beyond what is depicted, capable of disclosing an 'Other' to which we can relate, but whom we cannot accommodate.

In authentic Orthodox interpretation, here is nothing arcane or esoteric about the icon, nothing confined to privileged circles; the icon is not, to use Lossky's words, 'a kind of hieroglyph or a sacred rebus'. There is no mystery about its interpretation beyond the mystery into which all Christian believers are initiated in baptism; the best

<sup>12</sup> The isolated early (ninth-century) account of the appeal of a particular icon (the mosaic of the Mother of God in the apse of Hagia Sophia) by Patriarch Photios speaks of its 'lifelike imitation' (*akribôs ... tēn mimēsin*), which neither agrees with any modern perception of that icon, nor, indeed, with much of the rest of what Photios goes on to say about the 'magnitude of the mystery' disclosed by the mosaic. See Cyril Mango's translation of the sermon in *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1958), 286-296.

<sup>13</sup> Pavel Florensky, 'Reverse Perspective', in his *Beyond Vision. Essays on the Perception of Art*, edited by Nicoletta Misler, translated by Wendy Salmond (London: Reaktion, 2002), 201-272, here 216.

interpretation of the icon is found in liturgical texts. There is no technique called 'praying with icons'; praying with icons is no different from praying with the saints whose presence they disclose. The tradition of the icon just is the Tradition of the Church. The icon enables us to enter into that Tradition and to hear the Gospel. It helps us in our efforts to respond alongside all those others, the 'saints', who have themselves heard and followed before us. It leads us to know in our hearts the 'light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

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