THE ICON AFTER POSTMODERNISM

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WE LIVE NOW IN AN ERA which does not have even a name. We have passed through both modernism and postmodernism, and are looking for new definitions and directions. Modernism brought a fragmentation of philosophical systems, and also of people's sense of their own being. According to Mihaela Constantinescu, our minds were separated from our hearts; emotional balance was lost; and the human being became 'disintegrated', 'euphoric and fragmented'. The whole notion of identity was questioned as 'a myth and an illusion'.[1] A 'dissemination of the "whole" in a multitude of fragments' occurred.[2] And postmodernism made those trends even stronger.

Under such conditions people encountered what Zygmunt Bauman has called the 'ethical paradox of the postmodern condition': they were deprived of a moral framework for making choices, and, for the same reason, were overwhelmed by choices with which they could not necessarily cope. The result was a kind of false freedom: 'These times offer us a freedom of choice never before enjoyed, but also cast us into a state of uncertainty never before so agonizing. We yearn for guidance we can trust and rely upon.'[3]

But today the human community is coming to understand the danger of treating the problems that humanity and the individual face in isolation, and a more global approach is emerging to issues such as the environment and natural resources. Likewise medicine and psychology are using more and more holistic methods of treatment. At the cultural

[1] Mihaela Constantinescu, *Forme în mişcare: postmodernismul* [Forms in Motion: Postmodernism] (Bucharest: Univers enciclopedic, 1999), 75.
[2] Constantinescu, *Forme în mişcare*, 72.
[3] Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1993), 21.

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Icon of the Virgin and Child, said to have been painted by St Luke, St Mark's Syrian Church, Jerusalem

level, the postmodern era of play and deconstructionism has also passed and a tendency to go back to systematic thinking manifests itself.

The Church has always been a place where wholeness could be sought, a place where *being* has meant *being in communion* with one another and within ourselves, and hence, in John D. Zizioulas's phrase, 'being as communion'.[4] It has opposed itself to the fragmentation and individualism of the modern and postmodern eras. For the Orthodox philosopher and theologian Christos Yannaras, indeed, individualism is an aspect of sin:

> For the Church, sin is not a legal but an existential fact. It is not simply a transgression, but an active refusal on man's part to be what he truly is: the image and 'glory', or manifestation, of God. Man refuses to be a person, in relationship and communion with the personal God, and with the persons of his fellow men.

Yannaras further says that, when a human being 'makes himself secure in his biological and psychological individuality, which is a mode of existence contrary to nature', that person distorts his or her existential

[4] John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985).

truth and contradicts 'the trinitarian prototype of his nature'. Such a person goes towards an 'existential distortion [which] inevitably means natural disintegration, corruption and death'.[5]

Orthodox Christianity, in particular, has sought the wholeness of human being through liturgy and through church art, hence it is a good place to begin thinking about the role of the icon in helping people today to be integrated persons or, depending on the situation, to become persons again. This would mean becoming human beings who are content and at peace with their own consciences, with the world around them, and with God.

The Role of the Icon in Achieving Personhood

The Viewer

An icon is a means towards the realisation of personhood because it brings people into direct relationship with God. In the first place, the holy person depicted in the icon becomes present through it. The icon is thus a means of knowing God. Since 'the icon participates in the holiness of the represented' and 'reveals the incorruptible kingdom of God', through it 'the beholder becomes a participant of divine life'.[6] The Fathers of the Church—not only St John of Damascus and St Theodore the Studite, but also, though he is less well known on this topic, Gregory of Nyssa[7]—interpreted Genesis l:26–27 as meaning that man, who was *created in God's* image, is,

> … called upon to acquire the Divine likeness and fulfil the final purpose of Creation, his deification. There is, therefore, a relation between the icon and the image of God which man carries within himself, the concept of image being the central point in the process of creation. For in the last analysis, images of the image of God participate in its divine character.[8]

This is the reason why, while progressing in the knowledge of God when praying in front of the icon, the believing viewer becomes a true person.

[5] Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary P, 1984), 46.
[6] George Galavaris, *The Icon in the Life of the Church* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 3.
[7] Gregory of Nyssa, *Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudem nostrum: De eo quod sit ad imaginem Dei*, in *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Graeca*, edited by J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857–1866), volume 44.
[8] Galavaris, *The Icon in the Life of the Church*, 4.

Since the end of the iconoclastic controversy in the ninth century the individual image has become the graphic expression of holiness. Orthodox Christians venerate icons, honouring them in churches each Sunday and on religious feasts, going on pilgrimage to see icons which are considered miracle-working,[9] and making them the centre of daily devotional life by praying in front of them at home. These icons depict Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints, who are presented as radiant with a special kind of light, 'the uncreated light of God', as it is called in the language of the Church.[10] Icons make no use of shadow or perspective. This is because the light of grace within the saints dispels darkness, and the space in which they live and move is full of shining grace. When other objects appear in icons (plants, hills, animals) their spiritual essence is also revealed. This is one reason why I would call the style of icon painting 'spiritual realism'.[11]

Even the material used in making an icon helps the process of realising personhood, since the matter itself has become spirit (it makes present the holy person depicted). George Galavaris links this with the incarnation, saying that Christ,

> … by imbuing human nature with Divine life and Divine beauty, made possible the redemption of matter …. When man accepts the meaning of the incarnation, a new way of life is open to him. This is why the icon is linked with the main themes specific to Christian life: incarnation, life in Christ, man's deification.[12]

And Christos Yannaras associates the creation of icons with the Eucharist:

> When the eucharistic community becomes once again the axis of the Church's life, this leads to a rediscovery of the communal

[9] There are miracle-working icons in Romania, for example in the Neamț Monastery and in the Necula Monastery. See D. and T. Talbot-Rice, *Icons and their Dating: A Comprehensive Study of their Chronology and Provenance* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 16.

[10] See Sergei Bulgakov, *Svet nevechernii. Sozertsaniia i umozreniia* [The Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations] (Moscow: Respublica, 1994).

[11] This term is contrasted with Fotis Kontoglou's 'transcendental' and 'anti-naturalist' realism. See Fotis Kontoglou, *Vasánta* (Athens: Aster, 1978), 234–236; Kontoglou (1896–1965) was an iconographer himself. It also contrasts with Kotkavara's 'magic realism', applied by him to the style of icons painted by what he calls Russian 'revivalists' living in Paris after the Revolution. See K. Kotkavaara, *Progeny of the Icon: Émigré Russian Revitalism and the Vicissitudes of the Eastern Orthodox Sacred Image* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1999).

[12] Galavaris, *The Icon in the Life of the Church*, 3.

> character and ethos of liturgical art. The ontological content of the eucharist—eucharistic communion as a mode of existence—assumes that the communal reality of life has a cosmological dimension: it presupposes matter and the use of matter, which is to say *art*,[13] as the creative transformation of matter into a fact of relationship and communion.
>
> Man's art, the way he takes up the world and uses it, is a basic element in life, whether it brings about the alienation of life, or makes it incorruptible and raises it to an existential fullness of personal distinctiveness and freedom.[14]

The Painter

This brings us to a second way in which the icon leads towards personhood, this time for its creator. When an iconographer paints an icon, he or she participates in the Holy Communion of the Church. Yannaras writes: 'Byzantine iconography … has an organic, liturgical function in the polyphony of the eucharistic event, existentially elevating us to the hypostatic realisation of life'.[15] In their iconographic compositions, icon painters translate into visual terms the Church's doctrine and history, theological concepts (for example, the Trinity), the divine ritual, and in general the religious sentiments of the clergy and laity. Each part of the iconographic decor has a theological substratum and a symbolic intention; each group and cycle of holy images has a certain place in the decorative ensemble of the holy place and plays a well-defined role in the theological demonstration which a specific church building intends to present to the people.[16]

The emphasis on symbolism within Orthodoxy goes back to the Fathers of the Church. It is manifest in the construction of church buildings and in the arrangement of the images within them. In the first centuries it was expressed merely in the general idea of the church as a place sanctified by the presence of God, which, during the services, was

[13] Art—τέχνη—is defined as 'the science of fashioning anything' by Aristotle. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by F. H. Peters (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004 [1893]), 6, 4; see also Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, volume 4, part 1 (Paris, 1877), 1111.
[14] Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 231.
[15] Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 258.
[16] See Ene Branişte, *Programul iconografic al bisericilor ortodoxe. Indrumător pentru zugravii de biserici* [The Iconographical Guide (Typicon) of the Orthodox Church: Guide for the Church Painters] (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic şi de Misiune Ortodoxă, 1975).

filled with angels and contained human beings who were absolved and sanctified. The idea of a church (more a matter of inner experience than of outer representation) began to unfold itself in greater detail from the fourth century on. At this time Christian services began to acquire a definite form. At the same time, and in answer to their ritual requirements, a definite plan and a definite arrangement and decoration of the various parts of the church began to evolve.

The iconographer helps in the transfiguration of the matter involved in an icon (wood, pigments, etc.), but simultaneously realises an act of personal fulfilment. By using the technique of abstraction—which is more than a style—he or she expresses and puts into practice the ascesis of the community, of the Church as such, because the iconographer and the believing viewer share the same ascetic stance. An icon painter, before and during the work, undergoes a process of *kenosis* (self-emptying), and a *metanoia* (conversion) which transforms him or her. Ideally, an icon painter should be a specifically holy person, with a pure heart and strict discipline of the body.

Because of the eucharistic communion between the creator of the icon and the beholder, the latter must also undergo an ascesis. Yannaras says,

> The subjection of the individual view to a set iconographic type applies not only to the artist, but also to the person looking at the icon. And this … requires the subjugation of individual resistances—of sentiments, aesthetic emotions and intellectual elevation of the individual—so as to liberate the potential for *personal* relationship and participation.[17]

The believer who stands in front of an icon has renounced the individual way of seeing things and has been elevated to see them in harmony with the universal view of the Church. The abstract form liberates both the creator and the beholder to create and to appreciate the beauty of the icon within this eucharistic circle. There is a special beauty to such icons that people unfamiliar with the Byzantine canon cannot always understand or enjoy—so they can sometimes find the icons ugly. It is true that the icon painter does not aim to please the eye, but this does not make them 'ugly': an aesthetic of restraint is at work.

[17] Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 257, his emphasis.

Icon of the Holy Trinity, by Andrei Rublev

Paul Evdokimov describes the angels in Rublev's icon above in the following way:

> The three angels, light and svelte, are painted with very elongated bodies, fourteen times the size of the head against seven times for normal dimensions. The angels' wings, as well as the schematic way of treating the countryside, give the immediate impression of being immaterial and weightless. Inverse perspective abolishes distance and depth in which everything disappears at the horizon. The opposite effect is of course to bring the figures close up and to show that God is here and everywhere.[18]

[18] Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, translated by Frater Steven Bigham (Knob Hill, Ca: Oakwood Publications, 1996), 246.

The documents of the Russian 'Hundred Chapters Council'—the *Stoglav*—contain, in addition to rules governing the moral life of the iconographer, a chapter with stipulations as to how icons are to be painted.[19] Among other regulations, the documents specify that artists must paint icons as they were painted by the ancient iconographers.[20] This means following the tradition, but at the same time taking into account the general development within iconography itself. Therefore there is space for creativity within the tradition, and since this creativity follows canonical norms, it is blessed by God. As Leonid Ouspensky maintains,

> … the power of the tradition is the power of the Holy Spirit and of continuity in the spiritual experience of the Church, the power of communion with the spiritual life of all the preceding generations back to the time of the apostles.[21]

Until the influence of the Cretan school became strong in eastern Europe (from the sixteenth century onwards), iconographers there did not sign their work, because it was considered to be, not individual, but communal. In Romania and Russia this is still the norm. For someone outside the Church it may be difficult to understand how, in spite of being subjected to the tradition, iconographers still manifest their own inspiration and initiative. But, as Yannaras explains, the 'set forms of iconography' are,

> … not a kind of 'censorship' or intellectual emasculation imposed on the artist and his ability. On the contrary, the more he is freed from his individual aesthetic impulses, the more clearly is revealed the personal distinctiveness of his work, and the whole Church recognises her own universal truth in what he personally has made.[22]

The variety of schools in Byzantine iconography confirm this: in spite of not signing their works, iconographers such as Theophanes the Greek and Andrei Rublev have become well known and easily recognisable.

In order to maintain the self-discipline so essential to the Church community, Orthodox painters need to practise their skills in purity of

[19] This was a council of the Russian Orthodox Church held in 1551.
[20] See *Stoglav*, 41, quoted in Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, volume 2 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary P, 1992), 299–300.
[21] Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, volume 1, 11.
[22] Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 259.

heart and following the holy tradition. Before beginning a new work, the iconographer is supposed to be brought before the bishop to be blessed, though today they receive the blessing from their spiritual father, who can be any parish priest. They must pray constantly to be strong in their faith, to be protected from evil, delusion and fantasy, and to receive the Holy Spirit which enables them to see the subjects of their paintings truly. This is the prayer which icon painters traditionally say before beginning work:

> O divine Master of all that exists, enlighten and direct the soul, heart and mind of your servant; guide my hands so I may portray worthily and perfectly Your Image, that of Your Holy Mother and all the Saints, for the glory, the joy, and the beautification of Your holy Church.[23]

Dionysius of Fourna, an icon-painter who lived in the eighteenth century and wrote a treatise on painting, describes the steps to be followed by the painter, and gives advice to students of painting. He urges that, after a preliminary short training, 'let there be a prayer on his behalf to the Lord Jesus Christ, and a supplication before the icon of the Mother of God Hodegetria'.

A traditional Orthodox icon painter is a medium through which the image of the person depicted in the icon imposes itself on the work to be undertaken by the iconographer. In the words of Yannaras, 'The Byzantines were conscious of the fact that it is the Church which paints

Icon of Christ, Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai, sixth century

[23] Prayer as given by Aidan Hart of Shropshire, a painter of icons.

the icon "by the hand of the painter"'.[24] Of course, the gifts of an iconographer are reflected in the icons that he or she paints, but the painter in an Orthodox church does not work merely for artistic reasons, or to produce aesthetic effects, but somehow tries to 'hide' behind his or her painting. This attitude is the exact opposite of that of the individualistic 'conceptual' artist, who very obviously attempts to express personal ideas and opinions. The technique of abstraction used by the Orthodox iconographer is 'an exercise in subjecting arbitrary individual judgment to a set iconographic type, formed from the ascetic experience of earlier teachers of the art, in harmony with the universal experience of the Church'.[25]

The Icon after Postmodernism

When a fragmented life is lived in a fragmented and complex milieu, the risk of icon painters losing the connection with their inner self and with the Absolute is much greater than in the past. If this connection is not re-established through a spiritual process (ascesis, prayer, etc.), the work of these painters is different when compared with the work of those who are initiated and who can see much more clearly what is represented through their art. Without a connection with the transcendent reality to which the persons in the icon belong, it is impossible to create works such as Rublev's famous icon of the Holy Trinity, acclaimed by the *Stoglav* as the paragon of iconography in general, and of representations of the Trinity in particular.[26]

And without such a connection the beholder cannot enter into communication with the holy person depicted. This is especially important today, when many people are conscious of a gap between their minds and their hearts and souls. An icon made in accordance with the rules described above can be a very important means in bridging that gap. When praying in front of an icon, we do not only involve our thought and speech; we also engage our sense of sight, one of the most important in our lives. Supplemented—or not—by the chants of the liturgy and the perfume of incense, the colours of the icon place us in harmony with our surroundings.

[24] Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 257.
[25] Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 257.
[26] The icon of the Holy Trinity was painted by the monk Andrei Rublev (of Radonezh) in 1425.

By seeing beyond the immediacy of these colours we have the chance of experiencing serenity within our souls and of achieving wholeness, union of soul and mind. We can easily engage in the prayer of the heart in front of these icons. The beauty in icons is a soul-saving beauty. Church art expresses experiences, not theories and 'understandings'; it requires participation in these experiences, not an intellectual interpretation of them.

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