



Journal of Religion & Society

Supplement Series

The Kripke Center

Supplement 8 (2012)

Religion and the Visual

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and Wendy M. Wright

And the Blue Became Red and Dwelt Among Us

Mapping Boundaries of Meaning in Eastern Orthodox Iconography

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Introduction

[1] The widespread appropriation of distinctively Byzantine Orthodox iconography by non-Orthodox Christians seeking to enrich their own spiritual lives speaks to the timeless currency of its visual language for communicating perceived experiences of transcendence whether its arcane language is fully understood or not. Modern adaptation of Orthodox Christianity's sacred imagery, transacted through imitation of its distinctive structural elements (line, shape, spatial orientation, inverse perspective, color, etc.) applied across a broad spectrum of traditional and contemporary subjects, can be seen in the works of many non-Orthodox iconographers whose galleries are easily accessible via the World Wide Web. For purposes of illustration I mention only Aidan Hart (<http://www.aidanharticons.com>) and Teresa Harrisonn (<http://www.teresaharrison.com>), Anglican artists whose works exhibit traditional iconographic subjects and styles; Louise Shipp (see her work at

http://georgia.anglican.org/?page_id=59), an Episcopalian whose work expands these categories to include various Protestant church founders in America such as Anson Dodge, Thomas Bray, and the Wesley brothers; and finally Robert Lentz (see his work at <https://www.trinitystores.com/store/artist/Robert-Lentz>), a Franciscan friar whose collection not only includes traditional Christian subjects, but also a deified Mohandas K. Ghandi and various Celtic mythical personalities, most notably the “Lord of the Dance,” depicted in the form of a drum-beating, mustachioed and antlered Christ sitting naked and cross-legged by the water, a thick thatch of pubic hair exposed.

[2] It is not the purpose of this paper to critique the artistic value or religious validity of icons modeled upon or inspired by Byzantine Orthodox prototypes. The images mentioned here simply demonstrate how wide a river the genre has become and some of the directions in which its tributaries have flowed. Instead, this paper will limit itself to navigating the inside channel of that river from an insider’s perspective – that is, as a practicing Eastern Orthodox Christian and theologian – for the purpose of interpreting the deep structure of Byzantine iconography’s visual language, outlining some of the core principles by which iconographers sought to transmit their peculiar vision of a transfigured world. Although the presentation is geared for non-initiates, it offers theological insights that have managed to elude even Orthodox iconographers since the sixteenth century.

The Role of Icons within their Eastern Orthodox Sociocultural Context

[3] Archived among this author’s earliest childhood memories are colored portraits of austere, but serene haloed faces with large almond-shaped eyes, narrow noses, and diminutive mouths closed in serene, silent witness to a profound otherworldly Infinitude. With eyes that never closed, they watched me – and watched over me – from the walls of my home and the homes of aunts and uncles and close family friends. There were a great many more of them displayed in our church, *Biserica Sfintei Cruci*, or Holy Cross Romanian Orthodox Church; so many, in fact, that I suspected my family and friends had simply looted a few of them for their own domestic altars, which the Orthodox in all various languages refer to as “beautiful corners.”¹ However, these household shrines provide more than mere decoration. From an Orthodox perspective, these visual assemblages function to sanctify everyday life by integrating it with the ongoing liturgical cycle of the Church, offering readily available sermons in color, reminders and opportunities for prayer, and the experience of a timeless, living communion of the Saints.²

[4] Widening the focus to the larger Eastern Orthodox community one finds that these images are inherently and inextricably integrated into all aspects of the eastern Christian *ethos*, the socio-cultural content which includes historical and religious considerations that inform deep convictions about identity and one’s place in the world. This is not to say that non-Orthodox Christians cannot feel spiritually moved by gazing in silence upon traditional

¹ Descriptions of Orthodox life throughout the paper are based on personal family experience, both in the U.S. and in Romania, interpreted through the lens of a theological education.

² The Orthodox experience of the real presence of saints is evidenced by the fact that decorative linen cloths are sometimes draped over the faces of icons in bedrooms to preserve a sense of modesty during conjugal activities.

Byzantine Orthodox icons, enter into some sense of the Sacred in connection with them, or even endeavor to imitate the painting of icons themselves. But because sacred art and artifacts arising out of any religious tradition must be understood as something deeply rooted within unique historical and (perceived) sacred contexts, the same principle no less obtains in the attempt to understand Byzantine icons *cognitively* in a way that best approximates how it is they are *experienced* by Eastern Orthodox Christians. Thus, any attempt to isolate Orthodox religious imagery from its natural socio-cultural context, which embodies a long, unbroken, and compressed sacred memory, cannot help but distort the perception of the Byzantine Orthodox icon's nature and function. For example, icons looted from Constantinople during (and for several decades after) the Fourth Crusade (1204), many of which are still on display in French and Italian museums, are celebrated as historically and aesthetically invaluable works of art; but with the easing of travel restrictions in the new Europe following the demise of communism, museum guards must now intervene with eastern European visitors naturally inclined toward slipping behind the cordons to venerate their sacred relics with a kiss.

[5] Another example of contrasting experiences between eastern and western Christians is found in their respective perceptions of the iconostasis, the stand or wall in the worship space displaying icons of Christ and the Saints that looms before the face of Orthodox Christian worshipers. This structure is almost always described as something that divides or separates the sanctuary from the nave; however, its role – and, I would add, the actual experience of Orthodox faithful – is not at all one of separation or division, but of unity and integration with what goes on beyond, made possible by means of the images themselves. As evidenced by their constant veneration by priests and laity throughout the liturgy, these images are regarded as mystical portals to the Kingdom of God that invite the praying community to “lay aside all earthly cares,” as the Divine Liturgy admonishes, and to rigorously examine one's own heart and enter into the Holy Mysteries taking place in its midst. When the Orthodox priest emerges periodically from the sanctuary for the purpose of censuring the icons, visitors will notice that the worshipers, standing prayerfully in the presence of the saints and awaiting sanctification, are censured as well. This is because the word icon, which comes from the Greek word for image (εἰκών), applies also to human beings, who according to Scripture are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). It is this experience of ultimate reality, expressed liturgically as the Kingdom of God, that shines forth in Byzantine Orthodox religious visual imagery, all arrayed in divine light, transfigured perspective, and living color.

[6] Yet another cultural contrast emerges in understanding the function of icons. Numerous blogs, magazine articles, and even some iconographer's websites assert that the primary purpose of icons is to illuminate Scripture, an assumption one might reasonably expect from Protestant circles affirming the authority of *sola scriptura*, but such misperception oddly arises within catholic communions as well – Anglican, Episcopalian, and Roman Catholic. In any event, one finds far more post-biblical subjects depicted among the vast array of Orthodox icons, including early bishops and teachers, like St. Nicholas and the Three Hierarchs; significant events, like the First and Seventh Ecumenical Councils; hundreds of holy martyrs

and confessors, including one icon for an entire group of forty martyred soldiers;³ various Orthodox kings, queens, and princes, like the early twentieth century Romanovs of tsarist Russia, canonized in 2000; and, finally, dozens of localized saints, like Bishop Herman of Alaska (1970), Raphael of Brooklyn (2000), Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich (2003), and the 36 priest-martyrs of Bosnia (2005). These examples should suffice to show that the primary function of icons must be something other than the mere illumination of Scripture.

[7] Should the subject of an icon happen to be a biblical person or event, it is only because the icon and the Bible share a common liturgical tradition. According to Basil the Great of Caesarea (fourth century), “What the Word brings forth through the ear, painting silently conveys through the image” (quoted in Lossky and Ouspensky: 30). Centuries later, the Seventh Ecumenical Council would assert that icons and Scripture work together mutually in revealing knowledge of heavenly realities (*The Seven Ecumenical Councils*: 523-87), thus sharing the same dogmatic and liturgical functions within the ongoing life of the Church. Also, the criterion by which an icon comes to be incorporated into the Orthodox liturgical tradition involves the same process that determines which texts and hymns are deemed appropriate (Lossky and Ouspensky: 30-31).

[8] In sum, icons in the Orthodox tradition carry out a mediatory role in conveying sacred realities, manifesting the experience of timeless communion with the saints and angels in the Kingdom of God, whether one is standing in communal worship or carrying out domestic responsibilities within the home. Whatever else is expected of icons apart from this function, while of some certain value, can only be something else.

The Nature of Icons within the Byzantine Orthodox Tradition

[9] Given the primary role of icons in the Byzantine Orthodox *ethos*, it should offer no surprise that eastern Christians exhibit a guarded, proprietary attitude of pride and defensiveness over the perceived appropriation of their sacred images, often to the consternation of non-Orthodox Christians who may have a personal investment in the production or use of icons. To be sure, Orthodox Christianity characteristically exhibits an uncanny sense of responsibility for remembering and defending the hard-won theological formulations championed by the seven great ecumenical councils (325-787). However, while the Christological and Trinitarian doctrinal formulations delimiting heterodoxy from Orthodoxy and generated during the first six ecumenical councils are remembered in the Creed, it is the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the so-called “Triumph of Orthodoxy,” for which Orthodox churches all over the world come together on the first Sunday of Lent in order to celebrate the Church’s victory over the Byzantine emperors who had prohibited the use of icons in worship.⁴

³ The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste were widely celebrated throughout Byzantium, and were popular in the West as well. According to Orthodox tradition, the Holy Forty (Άγιοι Τεσσαράκοντα) was a cadre of Roman soldiers of the Legio XI *Fulminata* who accepted martyrdom under Licinius in 320.

⁴ Specifically, Leo III, the Isaurian (ca. 728), and Constantine V (754). Historically, the final “Triumph” did not occur until 843, when the Empress Theodora (wife of Theophilus), supported by Patriarch Methodius, effectively suppressed a resurgence of iconoclasm under Leo V. The primary champions of this victory over the iconoclasts for all Christians, east or west, were St. John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite of

[10] This council, the last of the truly ecumenical, or universal councils to be celebrated by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians together, affirmed that transfigured humanity could be represented in visual media in that the Incarnation of Christ made it possible for the sanctification of matter itself. As a result, the need for symbolic expression witnessed in the simple iconography of the first-century catacombs of Asia Minor, North Africa, and Rome⁵ gave way to more developed portraits of Christ and the saints (as well as to the rounded statues venerated by the Latin West), such as those witnessed by the early 4th-C church historian Eusebius,⁶ came to be celebrated as a testimony to the doctrine of the Incarnation, that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

[11] Following the Triumph of Orthodoxy, Byzantine Orthodox iconographers simply resumed what they had been doing all along, namely painting icons according to the tradition of their forbearers, only with greater intensity and attention to canonical norms. But while styles and influences continued to rise, shift and fall in the many centuries since then, the iconographer’s sacred task remained: ideally, to achieve the image and likeness of the prototype on the basis of knowledge and enlightenment derived from his or her own spiritual interiority within the Orthodox ethos, and not merely to copy it in slavish exactitude on the one hand, nor re-create it out of selfish, individualistic innovation on the other. Although realistically one may find that both of these attitudes obtain within the Orthodox tradition, it is a core principle of the Eastern Tradition to paint *from* an icon, not merely to copy it – and certainly never to depart from it.

[12] When viewing an icon painted within the tradition of the Byzantine Orthodox East, one should understand that from an Orthodox perspective, ideally what is being depicted is a shared view of a transfigured cosmos; that is, creation restored to its primordial timelessness, simplicity and beauty, refracted through the spiritual eyes of one who has humbled himself or herself through a process of rigorous self-examination, genuine repentance, honest confession, interiorized prayer, and selfless acts, all necessary ingredients for the achieving dissolution of the ego-self in order to attain a true glimpse of the divine realm (θεωρία) along the path of eternal movement towards God (θέωσις) (see Meyendorff 1989). The

Constantinople, as well as Patriarch Nicephoros, also of Constantinople (see Meyendorff 1974: 44; Florovsky). Recalling earlier discussion about the relationship between icons and Scripture, imagine the uproar that would have occurred had the Emperor outlawed liturgical reading of the Bible.

⁵ Christian art of the catacombs included pictures of anchors, fish, and lambs. More elaborate paintings depicted scenes from the Bible, especially “Daniel in the Lion’s Den” and the “Three Children in the Fiery Furnace.”

⁶ Eusebius claims to have seen a statue of the woman with the issue of blood mentioned in the Gospels (Mark 5:25-34 and parallels), as well as portraits of Sts. Peter and Paul; but he seems not to have been a fan of such images, agreeing with other early figures of the church that artistic representations of any kind derived from paganism (*Ecclesiastical History* VI.18). Others, most notably the Cappadocians and John Chrysostom, supported images as an intrinsic part of Christian worship.

proper fashioning of icons thus involves a process of synergy in which the fallen human will, seeking fulfillment in God, finds conformity with the divine will.⁷

[13] This conviction contrasts sharply with western ideals. Artistic freedom, for example, generally understood in the West to mean the unbridled, individualistic expression of an artist's personality, is something absolutely foreign to the deep channel of the Byzantine iconographic tradition. Moreover, the term "artistic genius" could only refer to the way in which ultimate reality presents itself through an anonymous iconographer's interiorized work, informed by a divine knowledge that beautifully and harmoniously integrates and transfigures the created world. This shared view of ultimate reality transmitted over the centuries, accounts for the tradition's fluid visual homogeneity. It might also be argued that any unimpeded individualistic freedom of expression on the part of an iconographer irresponsibly serves to diminish the beholder's freedom by distorting or altogether blocking a viewer's opportunity to obtain a glimpse of ultimate reality, i.e., the Kingdom of God (Lossky and Ouspensky: 42 n. 5). Finally, from an Orthodox theological perspective, the vain and illusory nature of individuality only adds to the fragmentation of the world, thus undermining wholeness and catholicity.

[14] Herein lies an essential key to understanding the nature of icons. It would be naive to assume that Byzantine prototypes were somehow fashioned by ill-trained artists whose eyes or hands were incapable of depicting human anatomy, architecture, or the natural world at large, or that a lack of imagination and creativity on the part of some imagined, backward East prevented the genre from developing a more realistic style. After all, it is well known that a number of Greeks stand alongside the best of Renaissance artists, including of course the masterful Domenikos Theotokopoulos, better known by his ethnic marker El Greco but also Antonios Vasilakis, Michael Damaskinos, Angelos Pitzamanos, Emmanuel Tzane, and Theodore Poulakis to name just a handful. Furthermore, while the application of such things as geometric perspective is credited to the Renaissance, it has been asserted that ancient Greeks passed on the principle of mathematical perspective to the Romans some 1500 years earlier, since it is a subject one finds discussed in certain Greek philosophical texts.⁸

[15] Nevertheless, the rise of European Renaissance art presented an especially challenging dilemma for Byzantine Orthodox iconographers. Influenced by humanist ideals, Renaissance artists began to examine and emphasize the natural world around them. Along with this fascination for naturalism and detail, Western artists began rediscovering classical representations of human anatomy and emotion. In their portraits of Christ, Renaissance masters intensified the human suffering of Jesus, all but ignoring other aspects of hard-won dogmatic formulations that affirmed the reality of Christ's divine nature (φύσις) and person (ὑπόστασις). As a result, painfully realistic depictions of Christ's human suffering were created, which still evoke powerful emotional responses in viewers today. The ideals and

⁷ In contrast to the Augustinian notion that the human being is like some empty vessel in need of an infilling of grace, Orthodox theology holds that by dint of the Incarnation human beings are essentially complete, but that the ego-self obscures the true nature of the human person and is the source of sin (see Lossky: 114-34).

⁸ According to Tyler, "The first historical mentions of art, by Plato and contemporaries in the 5th century BC, were provoked by the dramatic use of perspective in the scenery for the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles."

techniques of Renaissance art that went into these and other compositions were seductive even to the most faithful Orthodox iconographers, to the point that the perceived illusory realism of this world began to garble the syntax of Byzantine iconography's visual language, reducing dogmatic content to vain babble and muting any potential for deification. From the sixteenth century, throughout much of the Orthodox world it became fairly common to find somewhat traditional Byzantine-style depictions of deified humanity infused with the West's innovative tendency to humanize God.

Decoding the Icon

[16] So what are the techniques by which Orthodox iconographers depict transfigured life, so effectively that many non-Orthodox Christians seek to claim, copy, and adapt what they do for the purposes of spiritually renewing and invigorating themselves within their own religious communities? What is the secret of their esoteric visual language and how does it function in transforming the mundane world after the manner of its otherworldly patterns?

[17] It has already been stated that the Byzantine Orthodox icon manifests the transfigured state of created being sanctified by the divine energies. This special energy, described in the Orthodox tradition as "Uncreated Light" (Ἄκτιστον φῶς), is the light of the Transfiguration viewed by the Apostles on Mount Tabor according to the Gospels (Mark 9:2-9; Matthew 17:1-3; Luke 9:28-36). This vision of the divine energies, known as *theoria* (θεωρία) in the Orthodox tradition, is expressed in the shimmering gold that backlights and surrounds traditional Byzantine icons. Because the divine light of these energies permeates all things in the Kingdom of God, apart from the slight shading one sees on the face and hands of transfigured saints, shadows are nowhere else to be found.

[18] Although language about icons unavoidably includes colors, apart from a few basic traditional norms there seem to be no canonical rules regarding the use of one color over another. Most depictions of Christ show him with a blue cloak over a red tunic, while icons of the *Theotokos* ("God-bearer," or "Mother of God") show a red cloak over a blue tunic. It is generally held that blue symbolizes divinity, while red, being the color of blood, represents humanity. Thus, in the case of Christ the Chalcedonian formulation of two natures in one divine person (therefore blue outside) is upheld, while the reversal of colors for the *Theotokos* uphold the Council of Ephesus that affirms Mary (fully human) bore God in her womb. Interestingly, I have heard arguments by Byzantine Catholics that reverse the meanings of the colors yet still offer viably Orthodox theological interpretations. In any event, if there ever existed a fixed rule, it has not survived, which may in part be attributed to increasing variations in available pigments due to the spread of local iconography throughout the Orthodox world.

[19] Another way that transfigured humanity is revealed is through deified anatomy, expressed through bulbous skulls with wide almond-shaped eyes, incredibly narrow noses, and relatively small, closed lips, all arranged in visages that arrest and beckon the viewer to yield to a state of interiorized prayer, humility, and repentance that carries the promise of entering into authentic existence. These faces are painted full on, or at three-quarters face, in order to maintain communion with the beholder. They do not provoke emotion, but serve

to guide the beholder's mind and heart toward sanctification in eternal movement (θέωσις) toward the Holy Trinity.

[20] The depiction of deified saints also retains some of their distinctive characteristics. For example, the Apostle Peter is traditionally depicted with a full grey beard and bushy head of hair, in contrast to St. Paul's shorter, darker beard and recessed hairline. Often a few essential features of a particular saint's earthly role are depicted and distinctive markings serve to maintain a connection between the historical person and his or her timeless present reality: bishops and doctors of the Church are painted in their episcopal vestments; Old Testament prophets are often depicted carrying a scroll; martyrs are usually attired in robes of red, symbolizing their baptism in blood, and sometimes hold a cross; a white veil represents chastity; warriors like Sts. George and Demitrios are suited in armor; and God-fearing kings and queens are depicted with their crowns. What is most important is that any innovative elemental departure on the part of an artist that disrupts the relationship between the icon and its prototype, including the use of a living model, betrays the mainstream of the iconographic tradition. This does not mean that new saints cannot be depicted – for we have already seen that they are – just that there is an ongoing traditional, spiritual and stylistic template for doing so.

[21] The ancient and universal visual motif of the halo (ἅλωσις) offers yet another glimpse of transfigured life. Although the earliest Christian representations of the halo seem to be reserved exclusively for Christ, this motif eventually came to represent the transfigured lives of the saints. Following the dogmatic formulations of the First Ecumenical Council, convened in Nicaea in 325, saints began receiving haloes, while Christ's halo was enhanced to reinforce the doctrinal victory over Arius and his party, which had asserted that the second person of the Trinity was not co-eternal with God the Father. As a result, icons of Christ came to bear the words Alpha and Omega, corresponding to our A to Z, an alphabetical merismus representing the divine attribute of eternity. Icons of Christ also acquired the Greek words ὁ ὄν in the tri-partite sections of the halo, literally “the Existing One,” referring to the self-revelation of God to Moses on Mount Sinai, “I am that I am.” Following the Third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, 431), which countered the teachings of Nestorius regarding Mary, the doctrinal formulation affirming the title “Mother of God” comes to be represented in transfigured glory along with her divine child. The veneration of the *Theotokos* led to her larger-than-life depiction on the eastern wall of Orthodox churches, just behind the altar, in direct line of view through the royal doors.

[22] As in the depiction of transfigured humanity, iconographic presentations of restored nature and deified architecture also retain their connections with historical events and places. They are not preserved as any sort of snapshot within their original earthly context; rather they serve as situating background for the spiritual content that envisions the subject in its transfigured, integrated world. For example, an event that takes place in an enclosed area, such as the birth of Christ in a cave (not a manger!) or one of the Evangelists working away in his scriptorium, is painted with its related structures in the background. In some pre-sixteenth century cases, the architecture seems entirely illogical, as though anticipating the designs of M. C. Escher several centuries later.

[23] Following the influence of Western art in the late-sixteenth century, at which time many of the principles mentioned here came to be forgotten or ignored, the depiction of architecture came to be composed more logically. For the first time in the Orthodox iconographic tradition, sacred events came to be depicted as taking place *within* their respective structures, drawn in a manner that made this-world architectural sense. These tendencies conspired to eradicate the effect of traditional iconographic representation, which conveyed the sense that the sacred events depicted take place “outside the laws of earthly logic” (Lossky and Ouspensky: 40).

[24] The depiction of transfigured nature also serves the spiritual purpose of uniting and integrating human beings with God. Instead of reflecting the fragmentation and disorder of the present world, the iconography of nature portrays the harmonious peace and order that result from the divine energies of the Holy Trinity, all for the purpose of reconciling humanity with its Creator. This is why animals depicted in icons such as *Adam’s Naming of the Animals*, or the *Nativity of Christ*, never appear without human beings. Icons of the Nativity always portray orderly, peaceful animals whose knowing gaze is focused upon the subject of God Incarnate. Other natural features, like mountains and trees, are presented simplistically as background. Like architecture, they serve to relate the subject of the icon to this world, but remain rooted in the ultimate reality of the divine realm.



Figure 1. The Mystical Supper

[25] Yet another manifestation of the sanctified vision is found in the use of inverse perspective. Composition remains spatial, but the vista is not limited by the dimensional restrictions of this world. There is infinite depth, but the beholder’s line of sight does not permit detachment from the subject by advancing to some vanishing point in the distance; rather the inverse perspective of the icon controls and deflects the line of sight back and into the beholder, effectively drawing the viewer into the icon as a participant. For example, in

the famous icon of the *Mystical Supper* the vessels and utensils on the forward-canted table appear almost to slide into the viewer's lap (Figure 1). The receding lines of perspective surrounding the scene all converge at a point somewhere within the innermost being of the beholder, inviting participation with the saints seated around the table. By contrast, da Vinci's famous depiction of this same event remains rooted in finite, fading history; hence, his masterful work is appropriately called *The Last Supper*.

[26] The last feature in the Byzantine icons' communication of transfigured life to be presented here is found in the principle of simplicity. It is not unusual to find icons whose painters must have felt some dutiful need to include every detail associated with their subject, producing busy icons that compel the mind to flit about the image, like a bee overwhelmed by an abundance of wildflowers, driven by the need to light upon every detail and finding little opportunity for rest, let alone the respite of serenity that lies at the threshold of interiority and contemplation. In order to best illustrate this – as well as all the other characteristics discussed above – we turn now to what is by all accounts one of the most magnificent and influential icons ever fashioned since the classical age of Byzantine iconography (five to six centuries following Nicaea II in 787), namely, the famous *Trinity* icon, fashioned by St. Andrei Rublev in the early fifteenth century (Figure 2).⁹

[27] Gazing upon this masterful work one gets the feeling that only a monk truly immersed in spiritual illumination (θεωρία) could have been inspired to depict the Holy Trinity with such profound simplicity, told through the biblical story of Abraham's hospitality (Genesis 18), yet ignoring nearly every essential detail of the biblical narrative – including the Patriarch himself!¹⁰ Note the centering interplay in the composition; the lines of inverse perspective that draw the beholder to the table to sit in Abraham's place; the seemingly illogical architecture of Abraham's home in the background and the historical marker of the tree, the oak of Mamre, where, according to the Bible, Abraham made his home. The sheer simplicity of this icon, with its interactive trigonometry and deified view of creation invites participation in the mystical union of one's deepest, truest inner self with the infinite depths of the Holy Trinity.

[28] So it is that the golden millennial age of Byzantine Orthodox iconography continues not only to nourish the Eastern churches of today, but also appeals to Christians of every stripe drawn to the ineffable mystery at the center of things. For those whom the icons have touched, the inescapable question posed by the saints as they gaze out from the eternal

⁹ Rublev's *Trinity* was created in response to a request by St. Nikon of Radonezh, abbot of Holy Trinity Monastery near Moscow, to find some way to honor their venerable master, St. Sergius of Radonezh, whose holiness was such that the uncreated light reportedly shown all about him. The icon was restored in 1904, and is currently held by the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow (see Bunge).

¹⁰ One of the longstanding debates is over the question of which Person of the Trinity Rublev intended to be represented by each angel. At the *Stoglavny sobor*, convened by Ivan IV "The Terrible" in 1551, it was decided that the highest, central angel represented Christ, which in subsequent reproduction would often be reinforced by placing *IC XC* in the angel's right hand. Although later art critics tend to accept this interpretation, I am of the opinion that Rublev would have intended to portray the classical Byzantine configuration of the monarchical model of the Trinity, which would posit God the Father in the uppermost position with the "Only-begotten" Son seated at the right hand of the Father, with the Holy Spirit, who "proceeds from the Father," seated at his left.

heavenly Kingdom is not “What does one learn from what happened with us way back then?”, rather “Who art thou, mortal, truly in this hour?” Such a question leaves one to consider how much more one might become should the illusion of the ego-self begin to melt away before the inviting image of authentic, transfigured life.



Figure 2. *Trinity*, Andrei Rublev

[29] I close with an observation made by Aidan Hart, an Anglican iconographer mentioned in the introduction of this paper, proffered at a conference at the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius Annual Conference in Stourbridge, England, in August, 2000. With striking honesty and humility, Brother Aidan writes:

. . . there was and is still, a growing feeling that in fact we might not have returned to the tradition as much as we thought we had. Having effectively lost the tradition, we are finding that it is not so easy to regain it in all its subtlety and profundity. We need to dig deeper still, to understand the icon’s timeless principles so that new icons can be more authentic, can go beyond the extremes of fearful copying and impatience “to do one’s own thing” before humbly imbibing the tradition.

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