

What is the meaning and the role of icons in Russian Orthodoxy?

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Rationale and Preliminary Research

I have lived in Russia for eight years and I can proudly say that the Russian culture and language have become part of who I am. When we moved to Russia, I was surprised to find that icons were everywhere: in churches, in people's homes, their cars, their wallets, even in front of beggars on the street. My mother had lots of them also. Confronted with the ubiquitous presence of icons, I started wondering: **What is the meaning and role of icons in Russian Orthodoxy?**

As I began my journey to answer this question for my internal assessment, my first step was to research the dogmatic foundation of icons. Paul Evdokimov¹ wrote in *The Art of the Icon* that “If the true forms of art never seek to replicate reality, but rather to reveal its meaning, (...) then iconography, at its peak, is clearly a form of pneumatology². That is why Saint John of Damascus considers that the Holy Spirit is present in icons” (176). According to Evdokimov and to the icon blessing prayer³, each icon is a living expression of the Holy Spirit, of Christ and of God Himself, making it very meaningful to Orthodox believers.

My next step was to try to trace the meaning and role of icons in the history of Orthodoxy. In *Histoire du Christianisme*, Gilbert Dagron⁴ explains that early Christians were wary of icons. First, the use of objects and images to worship divinities was associated with paganism. Second, some passages in the Bible clearly condemned any attempt to worship God through the use of images: “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them”

¹ a Russian and French theologian, writer and professor of theology

² The term pneumatology comes from two Greek words, namely, pneuma meaning “wind,” “breath,” or “spirit” (used of the Holy Spirit) and logos meaning “word,” “matter,” or “thing.” As it is used in Christian systematic theology, “pneumatology” refers to the study of the biblical doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Generally, this includes such topics as the personality of the Spirit, the deity of the Spirit, and the work of the Spirit throughout Scripture. (Source: <https://bible.org/seriespage/4-pneumatology-holy-spirit>)

³ “O Lord our God, Who created us after Your own Image and Likeness; Who redeems us from our former corruption of the ancient curse through Your man be friending Christ, (...) Your Saints we venerate as being in Your Image and Likeness, and we adore and glorify You as our Creator; Wherefore we pray You, send forth Your blessing upon this Icon, and with the sprinkling of hallowed water Bless and make holy this Icon unto Your glory, in honor and remembrance of Your Saint (N); And grant that this sanctification will be to all who venerate this Icon of Saint (N), and send up their prayer unto You standing before it;”. (Source: http://www.goarch.org/chapel/liturgical_texts/icon_blessing)

⁴ a French historian and specialist in Byzantine history

(Exodus 20:4-5). This defiance reached a culminating point during the period of iconoclasm. But Dagron points out that what iconoclasm really rejected, rather than the images themselves, was the act of worshipping them. For that reason, Dagron states that “the image [was] at most tolerated as a very primitive means of recollection and education, and as a devotional practice with no consequence” (95). Indeed, as only very few people could read in the early times of Christianity, it is clear that icons were helpful in educating people about religion. Both Byzantine and later on Russian Orthodoxy put icons back at the center of their devotional practices, as living expressions of the Holy Spirit, of Christ, and of God Himself. Their sacredness, however, comes from the fact that they are painted by monks and priests following very strict rules and rites, and that they are blessed by a priest.

I finally decided to ask my mother, a Russian Orthodox, why she put so many icons all over the house. She said that religion for her was sacred, very personal and was a family tradition. Icons were part of her spiritual life.

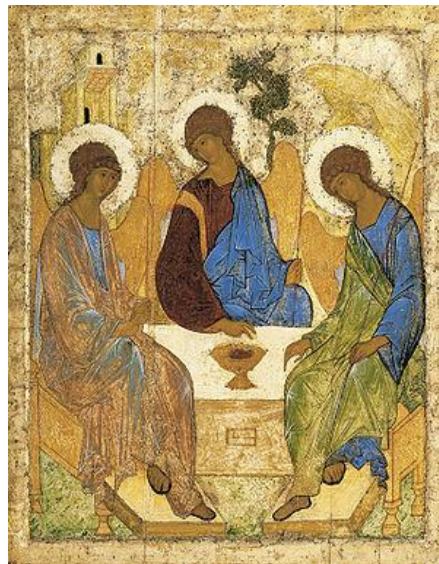
Plan for Study

Along my journey I will analyze the origin of icons, and the different codes behind the colors, postures of the persons represented on them, the different materials used, *et cetera*. To do this I will chose an icon and scrutinize it to understand the overall message and story that it is delivering. I will look at the different stories told by icons, and whether or not those stories are supposed to serve as moral principles for believers. Furthermore, I will interview a Russian orthodox priest in order to get his point of view on the importance of icons, how they should be used and what their role is in Russian Orthodoxy. Finally, I will get my mother’s point of view on why icons play such an important role in the life of a Russian Orthodox, and whether or not for Russian Orthodox believers God is present in the icon. By the end of my research I hope to answer the question: **What is the meaning and the role of icons in Russian Orthodoxy?**

Summary of significant findings

I interviewed my mother, a Russian Orthodox, about the various forms of icon worshipping that I could observe when I was in Russia, such as kissing or touching icons. I learnt that believers “touch and kiss icons because they believe that icons are a bridge between them and the divine

force”⁵. According to my mother, in everyday life, Russian Orthodoxes pray with icons to “concentrate on their own thoughts and reflect on their actions”. Next, I investigated Andrei Rublev’s “Trinity” icon, arguably the most famous icon in Russian Orthodoxy. Rublev, a monk in the Assumption Cathedral in Moscow, painted this icon in 1425, to represent the Lord, in the form of the three angels he sent to visit Abraham, in Genesis, 18:1-2⁶. In the tradition of Russian Orthodoxy, the three angels in the foreground, in fact, are the Son, the Father, and the Holy Spirit (left to right). The angels are seated around a rectangular table, with a chalice on top of it. The oak tree in the middle distance symbolizes life, and the mountain to the right of the tree represents the Spirit. The icon follows the dogma of the Orthodox Church as stated by the 1551 “Council of a Hundred Chapters”, according to which the Hypostases⁷, the three different persons composing the Trinity, should be equally represented.



When I interviewed a Russian orthodox Priest and his wife, I learnt that icons are “a vehicle to focus one’s prayer”, and that when one stands before an icon, one “stands before a prototype”. He defined icons as being “the Gospel in pictures”. The priest’s interpretation of Rublev’s Holy

⁵ Interview with Olga Yourieva

⁶ “The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. 2 Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.”

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+18>)

⁷ “(in Trinitarian doctrine) each of the three persons of the Trinity, as contrasted with the unity of the Godhead.”

(<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hypostasis>)

Trinity also differed from Paul Evdokimov's. He stated that the angels are not the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and that "the significance of the Trinity is the number not the persons". The angel in the middle, the Christ, can be recognized by the colors of his clothes: a red undergarment and a blue cloak. There are two chalices: one on the table, and the other one shaped by the two angels of the sides, with the Christ in it, symbolizing that "the Christ is the sacrifice being offered to the people". According to the priest, the chalice on the table contains bull, the Old Testament's sacrificial animal. The building in the top left indicates that the action is taking place outside. The priest's wife pointed out that the painting, following the purest Byzantine tradition⁸, does not show a perspective, but rather "affirms the surface", makes a point of being two-dimensional, "so that [the angels] are present with us". Finally, the priest noted that "all icons will have one of the figures looking at you, but that in Rublev's Trinity none of the angels are looking at you because they are communing, which demonstrates the angels' completeness". Yet, in fact, the triangular structure of the icon, as demonstrated by the angels' staves and by the open triangle at their feet, is meant to invite the believer into that communion.

Critical reflection and evaluation

The contrasts between the priest and Paul Evdokimov's analyses of Rublev's *Trinity* illustrate how icons can be interpreted in very different ways. Each believer will see what he or she wants in an icon. Some will see a saint, others will see help, others will see love, and so on. Icons are very personal objects, each person will contemplate them in his or her own way. As my mother said, every time one prays with one is actually taking time to reflect on one's thoughts, and to concentrate. The priest, however, noted that praying with an icon was not about concentrating on our own thoughts but rather about concentrating on our prayer. Icons are found in churches, in the believers' homes, in their wallets, everywhere. This is because icons hold such an important part in the believers' lives.

When I looked at the Trinity icon, I saw it as inviting the viewer to take part in the communion. Icons exist to tell a story, to make the believer experience that story, to connect the believer to the divine. In the purest tradition of Byzantine iconography, each color of the *Trinity* icon is

⁸ "In Byzantine theology, the contemplation of icons allowed the viewer direct communication with the sacred figure(s) represented, and through icons an individual's prayers were addressed directly to the petitioned saint or holy figure." (http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/icon/hd_icon.htm)

highly symbolic. All different commentators quoted in this research agree that Christ and the angels' blue cloak and undergarments represent their heavenly nature, while Christ's brownish red undergarment represents his earthly existence, and the gold wings represent the glory of God. For my analysis, following the priest's aesthetic and dogmatic interpretation, as opposed to Evdokimov's historic interpretation⁹, I will abide by the official dogma of the Russian Orthodox Church, according to which the angels do not represent the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The three angels' postures symbolize their unity and "completeness" as the priest puts it. They are all looking at each other, their hands are directed towards the chalice, their expressions are very peaceful, and the believer is overwhelmed by the warmth, kindness and peacefulness emanating from the icon. In the second chalice, the one that does not appear immediately but it is actually formed by the postures of the two characters on each side of the table, is Christ. The icon therefore represents the sacrifice of Christ, who is offered in that chalice to the viewer. As they share the chalice on the table among themselves, the characters in the icon also share the "larger chalice", the sacrifice of Christ, with the viewer. This icon does not only represent the Trinity, it represents a scene from the Bible, it tells the story of Abraham, and through that story, is meant to educate Christians on the beauty of sacrifice.

As I did my research I came across several contrasting, and even contradicting opinions, such as the views of the priest, Paul Evdokimov, or even my mother. Therefore, the role and importance of icons is subject to interpretation, but based on my research, my simple answer would be that no matter what meaning one attributes to them, icons are very important paintings representing moments from the Bible and they have as a purpose to bring the viewer closer to the divine and help him/her pray. To refine my research in the future I can chose a more specific topic. For example, I could focus on one icon, such as Rublev's icon. Talking about a specific icon, is already by itself demonstrating the role and the importance that icons play in Russian Orthodoxy, it is through the analysis of Rublev's icon that I got to my conclusion. Throughout the process of

⁹ Paul Evdokimov bases his interpretation according to which the three angels represent the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit on a testimony by St Stephen of Perm, one of Rublev's contemporaries and a friend of St Sergei, who brought the Zyrians an icon representing the Trinity, similar to Rublev's in its structure, and on which the words *Py* (the Son), *Puiltos* (the Holy Spirit), and *Ay* (the Father) are written in Zyrianic language. (p. 209)

writing this paper I learned a lot not only about icons, but about the dogma of Russian Orthodox Church itself.

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