

# Voices of icons

Hans W. Florin

*Religious icons had no prominent place in my life until, in the late 1980s, I sat alone in the chapel of a Romanian Orthodox Monastery. It was an overcast winter day, the dim reflection from the snow outside was all the light inside. It was quiet, when the heavy door behind me opened and a fully uniformed officer of the national army, a major perhaps, entered. He tucked his cap under his left arm, looked straight down the aisle and slowly moved toward the Iconostasis.*

Once there, his eyes focused on the familiar threesome: Christ, to his left Holy Mother Mary and to the right John the Baptist. After he had taken in the icon-bearing wall of prophets and saints, the officer stepped to the left in front of a chest-high rostrum displaying the icon of the day: he nodded as if to greet a familiar face, then he bent down and kissed the icon. With an upright salute he turned and left the chapel!

What was this? Was it real? Why had an army officer of a Soviet-dominated country kissed an icon? What could be the motivation for such action? Was this an exceptional event – or a routine expression of Orthodox faith? With these questions came my interest in icons, just as later I have seen many uniformed soldiers, sailors and officers attending Orthodox liturgies behind the Iron Curtain.

Another unconscious contact with the world of icons happened when, after settling down as a resident in the USA in 2013/2014, my wife Ev and I paid a brief visit to the World Association of Christian Communication (WACC) office in Toronto. There, a former WACC colleague, hearing of my new interest, slipped a book into my hand with the remark “Have a look at this – and can you write an article on icons for the WACC journal?”

The book was *Icons of American Protestantism*, edited by David Morgan. When I opened it I found Sallman’s “Head of Christ”, the authentic version painted in 1940, on the title page. And in a flash I realised I had seen this picture a long, long time ago as a 13-year old school boy.

In the Easter recess of 1941 I was, for the first time in my life, alone in a train on the way to my grandparents. Across from me sat an elderly gentleman, dark-haired with kind features. During an occasional exchange of remarks about the passing countryside, this gentleman opened his briefcase and produced a picture. “Do you know who this is?”, he asked. My response was “No – but it looks like Jesus.” “Yes, you are right. And this is exactly how Jesus looked – one has found this recently in America!” I wondered by myself how this picture during the war could have come to Germany. And could Jesus really have looked like this? My father, a pastor, had shown me many different pictures of Jesus with the remark, “But how he really looked we do not know.”

Not until I found myself unexpectedly confronted by Sallman’s “Head of Christ” was I ever concerned about Jesus’ look. For me it was and still is enough that Jesus Christ is present for me in the sacramental bread and wine of the Eucharist. Nor is it necessary for me to have my Lord’s reality authentically preserved on an icon-like image. With this I end this brief reflection on protestant icons with a quote from Morgan’s book regarding Sallman’s “Head of Christ”:

“Created in a studio, manufactured in a printing factory, sold in stores, installed in homes and churches, exchanged as gifts and cherished as mementos, Sallman’s massed produced images belong to a cultural economy in which the inexpensive image is charged with crucial significance. It is this entire cultural system that has characterized the practice of what one might call the visual piety of twentieth century American Christianity in general and conservative Protestantism in particular.”<sup>1</sup>



## The pendulum of iconoclasm swings back and forth

Of course, down the centuries, there have been other holy pictures, among them renowned masterpieces, intricately painted, hung in homes, churches and galleries and stored in warehouses, particularly in Florence and the Vatican. And of some of these there are mass produced postcards. This art form emerged in the Renaissance and evolved from there into modernity.

But Orthodox iconography has its origin under the influence of the Holy Fathers of the Church and its Eastern form was beginning to take shape by the fifth century. The East Roman Emperor Leo III – possibly under the influence of an image phobic Islam – decreed the removal of icons from public and sacred places in 726, a decree which from 730 led to the destruction of religious icons and statues and marked the period called “Iconoclasm”.

Opposition to this iconoclasm, the Iconoduloi” (servants of holy imagery), gained strength against Leo III’s order and sought to reverse his decree. At the 7th Ecumenical Council of Nicea (787), Empress Irene reinstated the veneration of icons – leading to the general lifting of all icon prohibition by 845. (Bentchev, 1999).<sup>2</sup> In the West the Vatican almost completely ignored this iconoclasm. Roman popes already considered themselves not subject to resolutions of the Eastern Church.

In the East, at the 4th Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (869 – 870), the church resolved the final and authentic equality between word and picture, between Holy Scripture and revered icons. The relevant text reads:

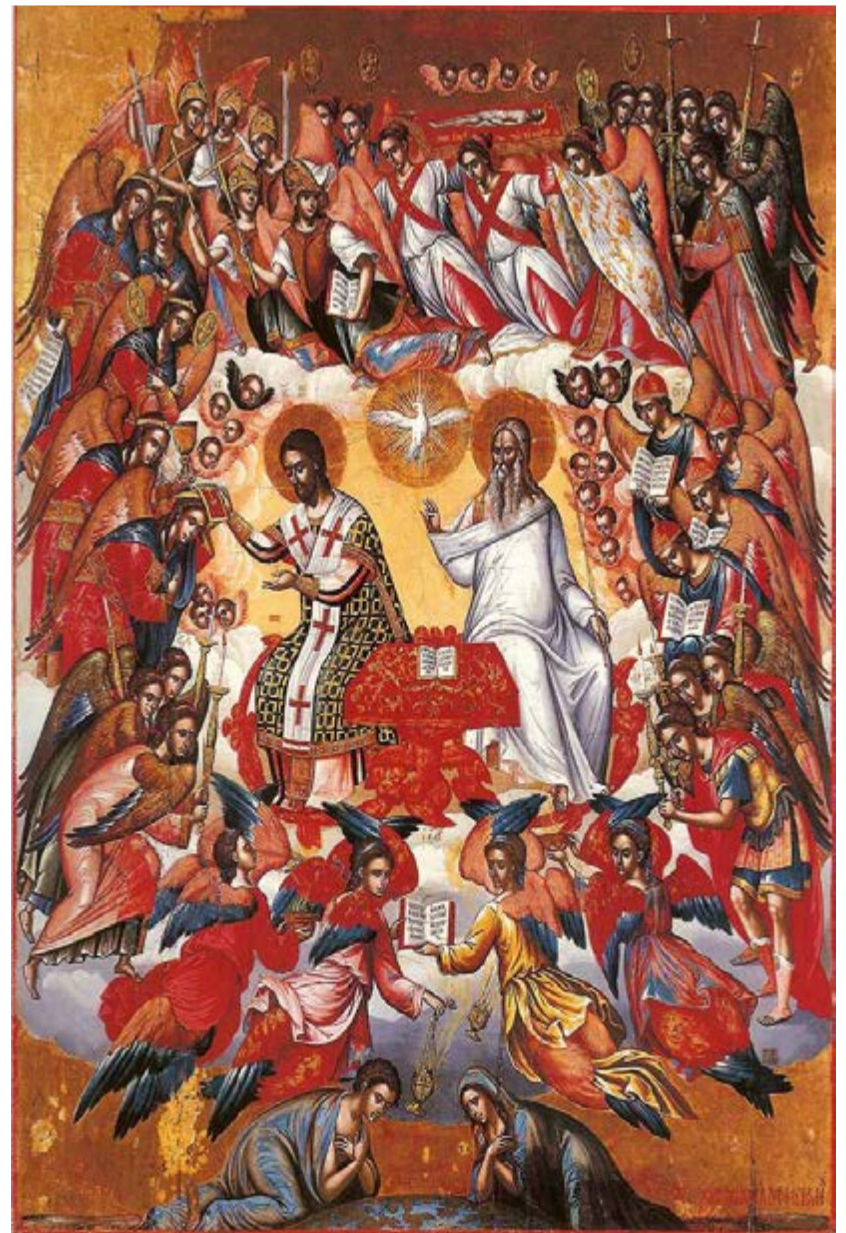
“We decree that the sacred image of our Lord Jesus Christ, the liberator and Saviour of all people, must be venerated with the same honour as is given the book of the holy Gospels. For as through the language of the words contained in this book all can reach salvation, so, due to the action which these images exercise by their colours, all wise and simple alike, can derive profit from them. For what speech conveys in words, pictures

announce and bring out in colours.”<sup>3</sup>

By the ninth century the icon culture of the Eastern Orthodox Church was widely established. Through the following extension of orthodoxy from Constantinople to Greece, the Balkan countries and into Russia, iconography developed varied centres: Constantinople, Mt. Athos, Salonika, Bulgaria, Serbia and the famous Russian icon writing schools of Moscow, Novgorod and St. Petersburg.

Painting an icon (literally called “writing an icon”) was and still is a highly personal spiritual and meditative exercise. Often an iconographer was a monk. The spiritual discipline of monasteries guaranteed the space and tranquillity for the content and of each individual icon to evolve and the art and skills of the iconographer to mature. The tradition of iconography has remained very much an exercise of Eastern Orthodoxy.

*Heavenly Liturgy. Michael Damascenes, second half of the 16th century.*







*Judgement Day. Russian, end of the fifteenth century.*

However, it is well known that after the lifting of the Iron Curtain, Orthodox icons attracted the attention of western art lovers and dealers, who were willing to pay good money for hastily produced reproductions of traditional icons. The export of genuine icons is strictly prohibited. For international exhibitions, controlled exchange of icons can officially be arranged.

The voice of icons expresses the Orthodox faith which the early Fathers of the Holy Church formed during the first three centuries. This faith is steadily in communion with God, the Father of Creation; God the Son of the Word, of the New Covenant, the New Testament; and God the Holy Spirit, who is and remains with and within his church and her believers. This holy triune communion is at the core of religious communication, shared with us by all Orthodox icons.

Thus, the world of icons hangs together in the universe of salvation, expressing individual insights of this universe. There are also highly complex and spacious icons in which the angels of

the Holy Trinity guard the churches' ever present liturgy, God's on-going service to the world (see icon on previous page).<sup>4</sup> Or the highly structured angel icon of the Judgement Day (icon, left).<sup>5</sup>

In the general order of icons, the most dominant one is always Jesus Christ, the Pantocrator, who rules and redeems the world. Next to Him, is Mary, the Mother of God, often in her colours of blue and sprinkled gold. She is probably reflected beyond orthodoxy in more icons than any other saint – well into the western tradition of the church. Pope Francis, in his *Evangelii Gaudium*, has these profound insights about St. Mary:

“At the foot of the cross, at the supreme hour of the new creation, Christ led us to Mary. He brought us to her because he did not want us to journey without a mother, and our people read in this maternal image all the mysteries of the Gospel... In her we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak but of the strong, who need not treat others poorly in order to feel important themselves.”<sup>6</sup>

*Mother of God of Tsilkan. Georgia possibly 4th century. Other sources suggest the icon is in the Georgian style of the 8th and 9th centuries.*





In further ranks of icons follow the arch-angels, Michael, George and Gabriel, the messenger of John the Baptist's birth. Moses, the law giver and the Old Testament prophets follow. Behind them one can find a mixture of regional kings, bishops, leaders and teachers of the Church. There exist books of saints listing their ranks and colours of display with explanations of their lives as examples for the godly life of the believer. They all are revered, respected and maybe asked to pray for the sins of the world. To the viewing believer, some icons speak of Christ's life from birth to death, resurrection and ascension. And some icons enlighten the believer with regard to the High Days of the liturgical year of the church.

In the Russian icon tradition there is a class which is quite unusual and therefore very remarkable for the direction of communication between icon and viewer: the icons of Holy Fools. The church has canonized people who don't fit into civil society, thereby revealing something of God which Christians may find embarrassing. "A fool for Christ," says Bishop Kalistos of Dioklea, "has no possessions, no family, no position and so can speak with prophetic boldness. He cannot be exploited for he has no ambition and he fears God alone."<sup>7</sup>

Among the holy fool icons, I especially like Saint Xenia of St. Petersburg (icon, top right). This Xenia was married to a colonel who drank himself to an early death. When, soon after her husband's death, Xenia began giving away her family's fortune to the poor as an act of Christ-like discipleship, the upset family sought to have her declared insane. "However, the doctor who examined her concluded that Xenia was the sanest person he had ever met."<sup>8</sup>

Another holy fool was Saint Seraphim of Sarov. He was born in 1759 and was made a priest in 1793. As a widely respected hermit he prayed for and helped the poor. It is said that he was visited in his cell in a forest by believers from all over Russia, including Tsar Alexander I, "who later gave up the throne to live a pious life in Siberia." Saint Seraphim was found dead in his cell on January 2, 1833, kneeling with crossed arms before the icon of Saint Mary.<sup>9</sup>



Similarly, Tsar Theodor, son and heir of Ivan the Terrible, though regarded by western diplomats as a weak idiot, was beloved by the Russian people. Throughout his 14 years on the throne, "He never lost his playfulness and love of beauty. He sometimes woke the people of Moscow in the hour before dawn by sounding the great bells of the Kremlin as summons for prayer."<sup>10</sup> As a Tsar, he avoided war, bloodshed and oppression. With such merits, it is no wonder that the Church canonized Tsar Theodor as a holy saint whom iconographers depicted in "ropes and gorgeous vestments."

The most famous holy fool was Saint Basil "the naked prophet of Red Square" whose remains rest under the ninth dome later added to the octagon of St. Basil's Cathedral. Saint Basil despised corruption, rejected the honours and attention of rich but self-serving merchants and did not spare Tsar Ivan the Terrible from condemnation. Tsar Ivan the Terrible would have tortured or killed his critics and adversaries, but he recognized a gentle fool in Saint Basil, an honest and holy servant of Christ. The tsar regularly sent him food and



gifts, including pieces of gold. It is reported that Basil “gave a piece of gold to a merchant, considered to be rich, but Basil discerned this man had been ruined and was actually starving but was too proud to beg.”<sup>11</sup>

Viewing icons of such Holy Fools, we can learn by their lives Christ’s admonitions in the Gospel!

Finally, there is what is considered by many to be the one icon which holds simply and tenderly all elements of the Christian faith: deep reverence, mystery, and by silently offering, shows despair, endless hope and the fulfilment of love. It is Andrey Rublev’s “The Trinity of the Old Testament” (tempera on wood, originally in the Chapel of the Trinity Monastery of Saint Sergius; now in the



Gallery Tretjakov, Moscow).

“From within this circle, this house of love, the mystery of God is revealed to us. It is the mystery of the three angels who appeared at the oak of Mamre, who ate the meal Sarah and Abraham generously offered to them and who announced the unexpected birth of Isaac (Gen. 18). It is the mystery of hospitality expressed not only in Abraham’s and Sarah’s welcome of the three angels, but also in God’s welcome to the aged couple into the joy of the covenant through an heir.”<sup>12</sup>

And, of course, the above interpretation of the three angels at the Oak of Mamre carries the viewer from the old to the new covenant, the Old Testament to the New Testament and thereby intimately to the Holy Trinity, God Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are in meditation yet visually aware of each other’s presence. On the altar, Christ’s chalice containing a lamb (sacrificial lamb for Isaac’s life and Jesus the lamb of God and Saviour), looking at the right to the Father as if to say: “Father, I have fulfilled your order and redeemed your creation.” And to the left the Holy Spirit looks on and thinks of all the healing, comforting and making ready for the love of God which has yet to be done!

In such meditation picture and scripture, Holy Icon and Holy Scripture flow together and fulfil each other. ■

#### Notes

1. Morgan, David (ed): Icons of American Protestantism (The Art of Sallman), Yale University Press, 1996, New Haven and London, p. 22f.
2. Bentchev, Ivan, Engelikonon (Machtvolle Bilder himmlischer Boten), Orbis Verlag, 1999
3. Ibid, p. 167
4. Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 2013, paras. 285 and 288
5. Sobernost Quarterly of St. Alban and St. Sergius, No. 2, 1984
6. Forest, Jim, Praying with Icons, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 10545, 1997, p. 140
7. Ibid
8. Ibid, p. 139
9. Ibid
10. Nouwen, Henri, J. M., Behold the Beauty of the Lord - Praying with Icons, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1987, p. 23

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