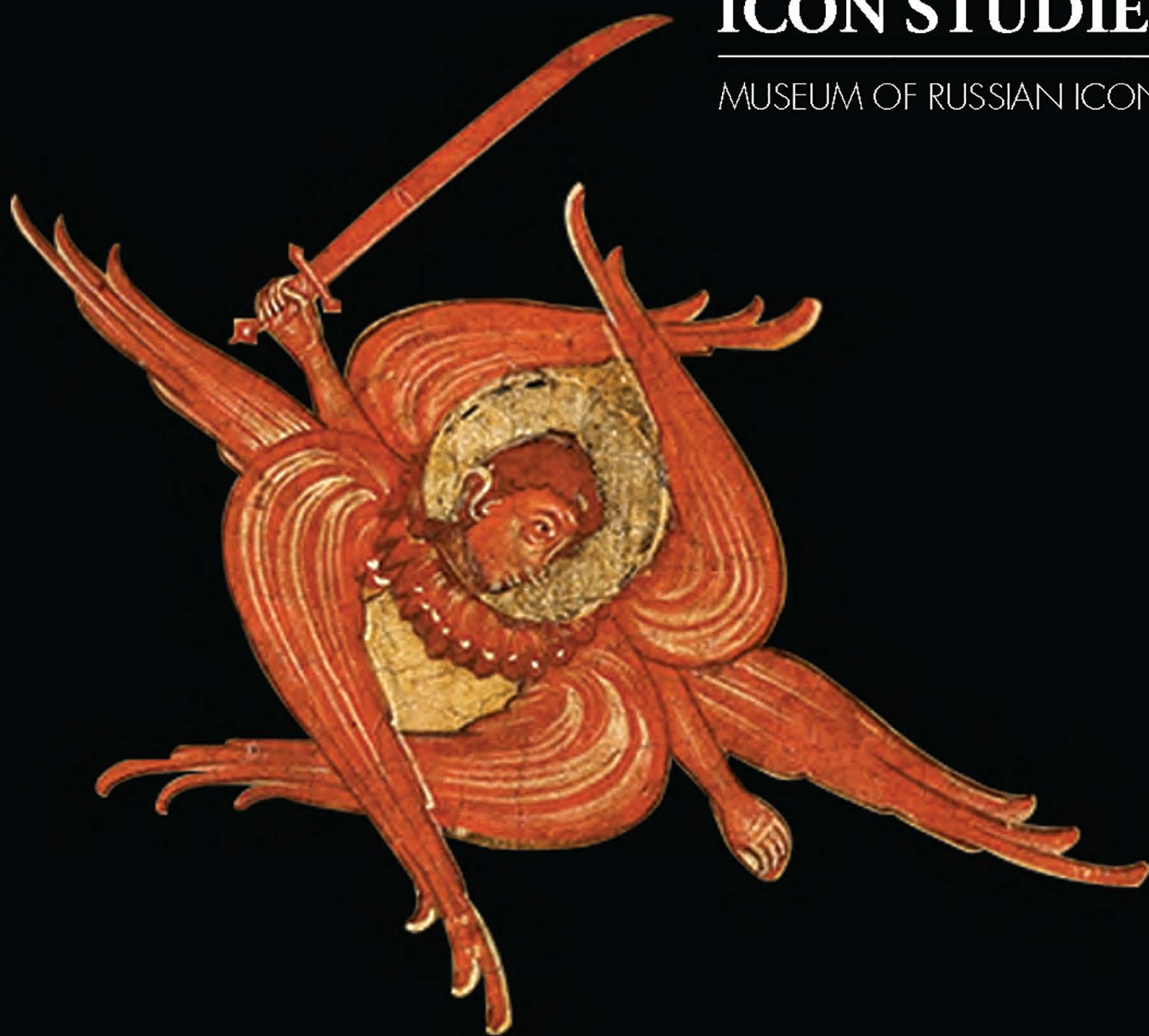


# JOURNAL OF ICON STUDIES

MUSEUM OF RUSSIAN ICONS



VOLUME 1 . 2015



# JOURNAL OF ICON STUDIES

## VOLUME I

Raoul N. Smith, Editor



MUSEUM OF RUSSIAN ICONS

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Please visit the journal's web site at [www. http://museumofrussianicons.org/research/](http://museumofrussianicons.org/research/)

Front and Back Covers: Detail from *Resurrection and Descent*, c1650, Museum of Russian Icons

## FROM THE EDITOR

As the only museum in the United States dedicated to the collection and exhibition of icons, the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton, Massachusetts, established the Center for Icon Studies in 2012 to support research in iconology and iconography. We are pleased to introduce a print version of the first compilation of papers from its online *Journal of Icon Studies*.

The research presented here covers a variety of topics, from the analysis of specific iconographic elements in icons, such as identifying new elements in traditional icons, to a philosophical inquiry on the representation of the divine. Each contributing researcher has a different perspective and level of experience in the field, from Engelina Smirnova, the doyenne of iconographic studies in Russia, to Diana Dukhanova, a graduate student at Brown University.

The editorial goal of the *Journal of Icon Studies* is to continue to expand the topics espoused in the Center for Icon Studies mission statement to encompass every aspect of religious icons and iconography—geographical, art historical, philosophical, social or religious—and we challenge our future contributors to broaden the type and scope of research to appeal to the widest range of readers.

We hope that this publication will encourage the submission of original research—by both experts and novices in the field—to the *Journal of Icon Studies* that advances our understanding and appreciation of this centuries-old religious tradition and art form.

Raoul Smith is Professor Emeritus of Computer and Information Science at Northeastern University and former Professor of Linguistics and of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Northwestern University. He is a Research Fellow at the Museum of Russian Icons and head of the Editorial Board for the *Journal of Icon Studies*.

Raoul N. Smith  
Editor  
*Journal of Icon Studies*

## ABOUT THE JOURNAL OF ICON STUDIES

The Museum of Russian Icons established the Center for Icon Studies and the *Journal of Icon Studies* to promote the academic study of Russian icons and to publish new and important research relating to them in a more timely and efficient manner than the usual print outlets.

Members of the community are encouraged to submit original research papers in all fields of iconography. Submissions will be reviewed by the Center's Editorial Board, and when approved, will be published on the site.

Please call 978.598.5000 Ext. 24 or email [research@museumofrussianicons.org](mailto:research@museumofrussianicons.org) for questions and guidelines.

### What We Publish

The Museum of Russian Icons has dedicated a part of its website to the online publication of peer-reviewed research in all areas of religious icons.

The goal of the Center for Icon Studies is to be a leader in the publication of such research. The areas of interest that we support are the history of icons, art criticism, social studies of icons, theological considerations in the development of icons, comparative studies across regional and national boundaries, the study of miniatures and their relation to icons, studies of icons in various media, paleographical and other aspects of the writing on icons, issues in the conservation of icons, and many other topics.

In addition to scholarly research papers, the Center publishes book reviews that touch upon icons and icon exhibition reviews. We also post conference announcements covering aspects of icon studies. And, the Center provides research tools to aid in the study of icons.

The Center for Icon Studies website also publishes papers by Museum affiliated researchers and by external scholars commissioned by the Museum. Unlike the submissions to the *Journal of Icon Studies*, these contributions, although solid research, are not refereed. It is a perfect outlet for short papers or for reporting preliminary results of research, on any topic in the field of religious icons. These are published on the Center's website under Occasional Papers.

For more information see [www.museumofrussianicons.org/research](http://www.museumofrussianicons.org/research)

# HOW TO CONTRIBUTE TO ICON RESEARCH

## **Submission & Editorial Process**

Contributions to the Journal of Icon Studies are solicited in all areas of icon research. Submissions, and any questions about submissions, should be made in electronic form to [research@museumofrussianicons.org](mailto:research@museumofrussianicons.org). The Journal of Icon Studies follows editing practices of The Chicago Manual of Style, including the transliteration of Russian Cyrillic characters.

## **Peer Review**

All submitted articles are given an initial review by the Editor of the Journal of Icon Studies. This initial evaluation is guided by the following criteria:

- The language of the proposed article is English or Russian.
- The material is original and important.
- The writing is grammatically correct and clear.
- The data are appropriate to the topic and factually correct.
- The conclusions are reasonable and clearly supported by the data.
- The topic has general interest to the icon research community.

Based on these criteria, the Editor assesses the paper's initial eligibility for publication. If a manuscript does not satisfy all these criteria, it is rejected and notice sent to the author. If the manuscript satisfies most of these criteria, it is sent to three members of the Editorial Board with knowledge of the topic of the submission. They may, in turn, submit it to outside reviewers. The identity of the specific reviewers is kept confidential from the author(s) just as author identities are kept confidential from the reviewers. Reviewers are required to maintain confidentiality about the manuscripts they review and must not divulge any information about a specific manuscript or its contents to anyone not involved in the review process.

## **Editing**

If the manuscript is accepted as is, the author is so notified and the publication process is begun. If it is accepted with revisions, the manuscript is returned to the author for revision with reviewer comments. Authors are responsible for all statements made in their work, including changes made during editing. The final form rests in the hands of the Editor of the Journal after consultation with the author and reviewers. The finished product will appear exactly as in a printed publication, but, when appropriate, with added features available only on an online site.

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# SAINT NICHOLAS THE WONDERWORKER WITH ANGELS AND MIRACLES: A NEW IMAGE OF SAINT NICHOLAS OF MYRA IN RUSSIAN ART OF THE 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY (ICON FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION IN LONDON)

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Figure 1. Antique shop in Moscow (?) with icons for sale, 1930s.

In recent years, since the lifting of the tacit ban on the study of many pages in Soviet history, including the circumstances surrounding the sale of artworks from the USSR to the West in the 1920s and early 1930s, Russian publications have frequently reproduced a photograph of a certain antique shop situated either in Moscow (most likely) or Leningrad (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> On it you can see a large number of icons intended for sale. Some of them, but by no means all, have subsequently been located. Thus, the icon of “Saint George and the Dragon”, which is clearly visible in the left-hand lower section of the photograph, appeared, after many changes of ownership, in the collection of G. and T. Tatintsian (USA) and was displayed at an exhibition of icons from private collections at the Pushkin

State Museum of Fine Art in Moscow in 2009.<sup>2</sup> The large icon of the “Last Judgement” was acquired in 1936 for the George R. Hann collection,<sup>3</sup> entered the collection of Serafim Dritsoulas in Munich, after it was sold in 1980, and in 2004 was presented by Patriarch Aleksiy II of Moscow and All Russia to the reopened Novodevichy Convent of the Resurrection in Saint Petersburg.<sup>4</sup>

On the same photograph at the top, under the archway and next to the “Trinity” we can make out an icon of Saint Nicholas, partly obscured by a rod from which the light is hanging. This icon, with its memorable composition, where the small central representation seems to be in a wreath of supplementary figures and scenes, disappeared from the orbit of specialists and its fate remained unknown.<sup>5</sup> Only in 2009 did it resurface

1 See, for example: G.I. Vzdornov, *Реставрация и наука: Очерки по истории открытия и изучения древнерусской живописи*. (Moscow, 2006), p. 319.

2 Pushkin Museum Catalogue, *Шедевры русской иконописи XIV-XVI веков из частных собраний*, (Moscow, 2009), Cat. 36.

3 The George R. Hann Collection. Part 1: Russian Icons, Ecclesiastical and Secular Works of Art, Embroidery, Silver, Porcelain and Malachite. (New York: Christie's, 17-18/04/1980), lot. 90, pp. 188–189.

4 N.V. Pivovarova, “Икона XVI века «Страшный суд»: дар Воскресенскому Новодевичьему монастырю в Санкт-Петербурге. Вопросы иконографии и стиля”, *Лазаревские чтения. Искусство Византии, Древней Руси, Западной Европы. Материалы научной конференции 2009*, (Moscow 2009), pp. 197–211.

5 Its presence on the photograph in question was pointed out by Maria Makhanko (Moscow), author of several works on hagiographical icons of Saint Nicholas.





Figure 2. Saint Nicholas with Angels and Miracles, Novgorod, 16th century. Private collection, London. 54 x 42 cm

on the art market, when it appeared at an auction in the USA, consigned by the heirs of the woman who had bought it.<sup>6</sup> It transpired that the icon had been purchased in Moscow in the 1930s by the American diplomat Norris Shipman and his wife Theophane (Fanny) Shipman, who was French by birth, the niece of the celebrated sculptor Antoine Bourdelle and well-known in political and cultural circles in France and the USA. In Moscow she had visited antique shops with two friends, one of whom was Francis Russell, the wife of the Italian ambassador Augusto Rosso, and the other Marjorie Merriweather Post, then married to the American diplomat Joe Davies, and founder of the delightful Hillwood Museum in Washington, DC. The events described constitute one of the most vivid episodes in the entertaining history of the collecting of Orthodox art, and Russian icons in particular, in the West.<sup>7</sup>

Now in London, the icon is known only to a small number of specialists. It is clearly a work of the 16<sup>th</sup> century produced in Novgorod. This is immediately obvious from the features of the style: the characteristic angularity and expressiveness of the contours, the large forms, the color contrasts, and the special shades of red and green. At the same time the icon is remarkable for its unusual subject and iconography, and the unique composition which emphasizes the majesty of the saintly image (Figure 2). In spite of the intense study of the veneration of Saint Nicholas of Myra in the Orthodox world which has been carried out in recent years,<sup>8</sup> the numerous publications of newly discovered and little known works depicting the saint that have appeared, and the commentaries on long celebrated ones, there still exist unexplored areas in this sphere.



Figure 3. Back of the icon.

### General information about the icon. State of preservation of the painting.

The work is relatively small—54 x 42 cm. Most likely it was not on an iconostasis, but was fixed to a separate base for veneration. The panel is made of comparatively soft and light limewood and consists of two boards fastened together with two wooden traverses (*shponki*), new ones in old grooves (Figure 3). On the front is a relatively shallow, hollowed out central section (*kovcheg*) for the representation, surrounded by

6 Ken Farmer Auctions, Radford, Virginia, 2-3/05/2009, lot 290, described laconically as: “Russian Icon”.

7 See: E.S. Smirnova, “Об истории собирания русских икон на Западе” [“On the history of Russian icon collecting in the West”], n.d.

8 M.S. Krutova, *Святитель Николай Чудотворец в древнерусской письменности*. (Moscow 1997); N.V. Pak, (ed). “Образ св. Николая Чудотворца в культуре Древней Руси”, *Материалы научной конференции 22 мая 2000 года* (St. Petersburg: Российская академия наук. Институт русской литературы (Пушкинский дом), 2001); Catalogue of Vologda Exhibition, April-May 2004, *Образ святителя Николая Чудотворца в живописи, рукописной и старопечатной книге, графике, мелкой пластике, деревянной скульптуре и декоративно-прикладном искусстве XIII-XXI веков из собраний музеев и частных коллекций Северо-Западного региона России*, (Moscow, 2004); A. V. Bugayevsky, (ed). *Правило веры и образ кротости... Образ святителя Николая, архиепископа Мирликийского, в византийской и славянской агиографии, гимнографии и иконографии* (Moscow: Православный Свято-Тихоновский богословский институт, 2004); G.S. Klokoza, M.S. Krutova, (eds) *Святитель Николай Мирликийский в памятниках письменности и иконографии* (Moscow: Православный Свято-Тихоновский гуманитарный университет, 2006); I.D. Soloviova, (ed). *Святой Николай Мирликийский в произведениях XII-XIX столетий из собрания Русского музея*, (St. Petersburg, 2006); M. Bacci, (ed). *San Nicola. Splendori d'arte d'Oriente e d'Occidente*, (Milan, 2006); A.V., Bugayevsky, A.A. Rybakov. (eds). *Почитание святителя Николая Чудотворца и его отражение в фольклоре, письменности и искусстве*, (Moscow : Skanrus, 2007); A.V. Bugayevsky, (ed.). *Добрый кормчий. Почитание святителя Николая в христианском мире*. Moscow : Skinia, 2011).





Figure 4. Handwritten Soviet museum label (detail of back).

raised borders that, following the old, early Russian tradition, are slightly narrower at the sides than at the top and bottom. Here and there under the layer of priming you can see the canvas (in the lower margin and the upper part of the right-hand margin), but it is not clear whether it covers the whole surface of the board.

On the reverse of the panel are two scraps from a paper label, with a penciled inscription with the words “Музей изя... куств” (Figure 4), i.e., probably the “Museum of Fine Art named after A.S. Pushkin”, as the Pushkin Museum in Moscow was called at that time. The inscription is in Soviet orthography and probably indicated the place where the icon was kept temporarily prior to entering an antique shop for sale. It would be a miracle if anyone managed to find archival documents about the icon’s provenance. Most likely it went up for sale not from a church or large museum, but from a private collection.

Figure 5. Detail: The center of the composition.



The two boards forming the icon panel have come slightly apart, forming a vertical crack, along which are traces of minor repair work—touches of priming and later painting. There are small inserts of paint in the lower part of the icon, where, as we know, there is always more damage than on the rest of the surface. The paint on the icon is rather thin and transparent in places suggesting that the paint layer may have been slightly washed off during restoration. However, the upper paint layers—the white strokes and fine hatching, and the outlines of the folds, are well preserved. Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly some touching up of the painting in places where it has been lost. These are clearly visible in the inscriptions: all the original inscriptions are executed in dark red paint, but the inserts are in bright red. Judging from the character of the restoration, during which the layers of darkened varnish were probably removed, perhaps later over-painting as well, and the necessary repairs done, this was the work of restorers who had been trained in the old Russian tradition going back to Russian Old Believer icon painters of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As we know, masters of this type held leading positions in the restoration workshops of the Soviet Union in the 1920s, which is when our icon was most probably cleaned.

In the raised borders, on Nicholas’ halo and above his shoulders there are small holes from the nails which fastened the precious metal ornaments—the cover on the raised borders, the halo and the tsata, a semi-circular collar in the shape of a crescent moon on the chest, under the saint’s face. These ornaments show that the icon was specially venerated in the church where it was kept.



Figure 6 (left). Detail: The Savior with Gospel Book and the Archangel Michael.



Figure 7 (right). Detail: The Virgin with omophorion and the Archangel Gabriel.

## Subject, iconography, purpose

The center of the icon is the traditional half-length representation of Saint Nicholas of Myra in a *phelonion*, and a white episcopal *omophorion* with large black crosses (Figure 5). The saint's right hand is raised in blessing and his left hand holds a closed Gospel. In the upper corners are the Savior and the Virgin Mary depicted down to the knee against the greenish background of the heavens surrounded by pink clouds (Figures 6, 7). They are turned towards Saint Nicholas, holding out the episcopal attributes, the Gospel and omophorion. Lower down, against a gold background, on a level with Nicholas' shoulders, are angels bearing the gifts of Christ and the Virgin Mary to the saint. Their names are inscribed: "АРХА[нге]Л[ъ] МИХАИЛ[ъ],

АРХА[нге]Л[ъ] ГАВРИИЛ[ъ]". Their robes follow the traditional iconography for the two archangels: Michael is in a red himation and a green chiton, and Gabriel in a green himation with a red chiton.

The holy hierarch himself is depicted with the attributes already presented to him. The representation of Christ and the Virgin Mary handing Nicholas the attributes was well known in Byzantine and early Russian art.<sup>9</sup> This iconography was intended to emphasize the special role of Saint Nicholas among the Christian Fathers of the Church and became very popular in Russia, where the story of the so-called Nicene Miracle of the saint's struggle against the Aryan heresy at the First Nicene Council, after which he was deprived of the rank of bishop and cast into prison, where he was visited by Christ and the Virgin Mary who gave him back the episcopal insignia.<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps in Russia, to be more precise, in Novgorod, where the most expressive early representation of Christ and the Virgin Mary handing Saint Nicholas the episcopal attributes has survived—on the 1294 icon of Saint Nicholas from the church dedicated to the saint on the island of Lipno (Novgorod Museum),<sup>11</sup> with large figures of the Savior and the Virgin Mary, who are each standing on a red cloud with their gifts touching the saint's colored halo.

In the newly discovered icon the theme of the highest patronage of the saint is presented with new details and a different intonation. New nuances of meaning are created by the inclined figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary, their turning towards the saint, the gold radiance of the background around Nicholas and, most importantly, the

9 N.P. Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas in Byzantine Art*. (Torino 1983), p. 79, note 9.

10 G. Anrich, *Hagios Nikolaos. Der heilige Nikolaos in der griechischen Kirche. Texte und Untersuchungen*, Bd. II, (Leipzig-Berlin 1917), p. 393; V.O Klyuchevskiy, *Древнерусские жития святых как исторический источник*, (Moscow 1871), p. 457.

11 V. Lazarev, *Русская иконопись от истоков до начала XVI века*, (Moscow : Iskusstvo, 1983), Cat. 17; L. Nersessian, (ed). *Иконы Великого Новгорода XI – начала XVI века*, (Moscow: Severniy palomnik, 2008), Cat. 4.





Figure 8. Detail (left): The rescue of the drowning Dimitri.



Figure 9. Detail (right): The healing of the possessed boy.

himself is not depicted there. The miraculous events are taking place through the agency of the angels who bear grace to those in trouble. The significance of the angels' figures is revealed by the inscriptions:

АГГЛЪ Г[осподе]НЬ ИЗБАВИ ДМИТРИЯ ОТ ПОТОПА  
МОЛИТВАМИ СТОГО НИКОЛЫ (*The angel of the Lord saves  
Demetrios from the flood through the prayers of Saint Nicholas*)

АГГЛЪ Г[оспо]Д[ен]Ь ИЗГНА БИСА ОТ ЧОЛОВИКА  
МОЛИТВАМИ СТОГО НИКОЛЫ (*The angel of the Lord drives a  
demon from a man through the prayers of Saint Nicholas*).

Figure 10. Detail from icon of the Dormition. Novgorod, beginning of the 13th century. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



Thanks to these inscriptions the role of the saint as a miracle-worker is not only revealed by the representation but also stressed in verbal form. The actual content of both inscriptions points to the role of the word, the saint's prayers, through the agency of which his miraculous acts take place. But the saint's role as miracle-worker is also revealed visually, as the angels are flying to the suffering in this world from the gold background where Saint Nicholas is. They are perceived as his messengers.

images of the angels, the heavenly messengers bearing the bishop his episcopal insignia.

It is significant that the one named Michael is depicted under the figure of the Savior, which suggests certain associations with this archangel as the leader of Christ's heavenly host, while the angel under the figure of the Virgin Mary is identified by the inscription as the Archangel Gabriel, which in turn recalls the theme of the Annunciation.

The lower corners of the icon are taken up with two scenes of miracles by the saint (Figures 8, 9). On the left is the saving of the young Demetrios, whose boat has overturned in the sea and on the right, the healing of the youth possessed by an evil spirit. The unusual feature of each scene is that Nicholas

himself is not depicted there. The miraculous events are taking place through the agency of the angels who bear grace to those in trouble. The significance of the angels' figures is revealed by the inscriptions:

АГГЛЪ Г[осподе]НЬ ИЗБАВИ ДМИТРИЯ ОТ ПОТОПА  
МОЛИТВАМИ СТОГО НИКОЛЫ (*The angel of the Lord saves  
Demetrios from the flood through the prayers of Saint Nicholas*)

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The icon's composition clearly expresses the theme of the glorification of the saint. This theme is expressed more clearly here than in any other representation of Saint Nicholas, even the most solemn: more strongly than in



Figure 11. The Virgin of the Passion. Crete second half of the 15th century, Private collection London

the strikingly large and splendid icon of 1294 or in any of the big Russian hagiographical icons of the bishop of Myra produced in the 16th or 17<sup>th</sup> century with their sumptuous frames of marginal scenes. The Savior and the Virgin Mary are inclined towards Saint Nicholas, the four angels form a wreath around the central image, and the compositional lines of both lower scenes seem to form a pedestal for the central figure.

As we can see, the idea of the glorification of Saint Nicholas, one of the most revered saints in Russia, is embodied in this newly discovered icon in new, special ways. Moreover a considerable role in achieving this is allotted to the angels who create a sense of heavenly grace and great spirituality not only by their actions, but also by their very figures, their splendid unfurled wings. The role of additional representations in this newly discovered icon is so great and so original that we make so bold as to call this variant of the iconography of the saint, which has never been named in surviving early icons of this type, “Saint Nicholas with Angels and Miracles”.

### The device of association and allusion

The theme of the glorification of Saint Nicholas is expressed not only by introducing the images of the flying angels and including the two scenes of miracles, but also by other devices, namely, the association of this or that representational motif with other widely-known motifs and forms. This applies above all to the figures of angels who are bringing Saint Nicholas the episcopal insignia. Their poses, the outlines of their figures recall unambiguously many other well known compositions in the art of the Orthodox world: for example, the angels in the “Dormition of the Virgin” who are flying with veiled hands towards Christ to receive the soul of the sleeping Virgin Mary (Figure 10)<sup>12</sup>, and also the angels carrying the instruments of the Passion in the composition of “Our Lady of the Passion” (Figure 11)<sup>13</sup>. Similar analogies going back to scenes where the main figures are Christ and the Virgin Mary elevate the new iconography of Saint Nicholas with Angels to the sphere of exceptionally high associations to glorify the great bishop.

The figures of the angels flying down to rescue Demetrios from drowning and healing the possessed man arouse other associations. One cannot fail to notice the resemblance of these flying angels to similar figures in compositions of the *protoevangelium* cycle—the “Annunciation by the Well” (Figure 12) and the scene of the angel bringing food to Mary in the “Presentation in the Temple” (Figure 13). The purpose of such parallels is obvious: both here and there we find heavenly succor, heavenly tidings sent down into the earthly world.

There is also a comparison, not immediately obvious, in the icon’s overall compositional design. Thanks to the separation of the corner compositions by wavy contours (clear at the top, but only sketchy at the bottom), the central part acquires cruciform outlines. We see the same pattern that is characteristic for the covers of altar Gospels, where it was customary to place the image of Christ in the middle (in the composition of the Crucifixion or enthroned) and representations of the four Evangelists in the corners. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century this old arrangement of the images on Gospel covers (which was already



Figure 12. The Annunciation to Saint Anne at the Well. Mosaic from the Monastery of Chora in Constantinople, circa 1315-1320.

12 See, for example, the 1105-1106 fresco in the Church of Our Lady in Asinou, Cyprus (M. Acheimastou-Potamianou, *Greek Art. Byzantine Wall-Paintings* (Athens 1994), pls. 56-57).

13 Representations that are well known in Byzantine and post-Byzantine art and in mediaeval Russia. See: M. Acheimastou-Potamianou, *Εἰκόνες του Βυζαντινού Μοναστείου Ἀθηνῶν*, (Athens 1998), Cat. 48, 68; Chr. Baltoyanni, *Icons Mother of God*, (Athens 1994), Cat. 50-53, pp. 171-177, pls. 87-93.





Figure 13. An Angel brings food to the Virgin. Detail from icon of the "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple". Novgorod, end of 15th - beginning of 16th century. M.E. Elizavetin collection, Moscow.

known in the pre-Mongol period) acquired figured contours separating the images of the Evangelists in the corners.<sup>14</sup> In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the cruciform shape of the central panel became more obvious, and these compositions on covers grew widespread—both in Novgorod and in Moscow. Of the extant 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century covers some stand out for their rarefied composition,<sup>15</sup> while others are very close in design and proportions to the treatment of our icon of Saint Nicholas (Figure 14). The latter include the Gospel covers from the Novgorod monasteries of Khutyn, 1620s to 1630s (Figure 15),<sup>16</sup> and the Holy Spirit, 1639, with later additions.<sup>17</sup> In the last two cases, as in many other covers not mentioned by us, the cruciform outlines of the central field are clearly evident, and in the cover from the Monastery of the Holy Spirit the resemblance to our icon is strengthened by the figures of angels, cherubim and seraphim around the central quadrifoil.

The association of the icon's compositional scheme with the structure of a Gospel cover elevates the meaning of the icon's representation to an exceptionally high level, recalling Saint Nicholas' role in promoting Christ's teachings.

The method of associating a representation with another image in order to demonstrate the symbolical resemblance between them is fairly well known in Byzantine art. It was often used in the art of the Comnenian period which was rich in refined associations. For example, representations of the Virgin and Child could be given outlines reminiscent of the poetic images with which Mary was compared in hymnological texts, and which, in their turn, were full of liturgical allusions. An instructive example is the figure of the Virgin and Child from an 1192 fresco in the church of the Panagia Arakiotissa in Lagoudera, Cyprus,<sup>18</sup> which due to the special outline of the arms holding the Infant Christ resembles a sacred chalice or liturgical spoon (λαβίς) in keeping with the metaphor in the patrological *acta* (Figure 16).<sup>19</sup> A similar device is also found in a Russian icon of the "Virgin Orans" c. 1224 from Yaroslavl (Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery), where Mary's silhouette resembles a holy chalice (Figure 17).<sup>20</sup> The same set of phenomena include the well known association between the mosaic of the Virgin in the conch of the central apse of the Hagia Sophia cathedral in Kiev and her long established epithet of the "Indestructible Wall" (which is in part associated with the text of Psalm 44 placed

- 14 Such as, for example, the cover on the Moscow Gospel from the beginning of the 15th century from the Trinity-Saint Sergius monastery in the Russian State Library, Inv.no. M. 8655 (G.I. Vzdornov. *Искусство книги в Древней Руси. Рукописная книга Северо-Восточной Руси XII – начала XV веков*. (Moscow 1980), Cat. 64)
- 15 For example, the cover from the Trinity-Saint Sergius monastery in the Russian State Library, ф. 304, Троицк., III, № 10, 1521 or 1527 гг., by the master Ivan Novgorodets; the 1530-1531 cover in the Novgorod Museum; and the 16th-century cover in the State Russian Museum (I.A. Sterligova (ed). *Декоративно-прикладное искусство Великого Новгорода. Художественный металл XVI-XVII веков*, (Moscow 2008), Cat. 57 & 58, pp. 327-330).
- 16 I.A. Sterligova, 2008, Cat. 73, pp. 353-354.
- 17 *Ibid.* Cat. 74, p. 355.
- 18 A. Nicolaïdès, "L'église de la Panagia Arakiotissa à Lagoudéra, Chypre. Étude iconographique des fresques de 1992", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 50, Washington D.C. 1996, pp. 110-111, fig. 3; repr. In color: M. Acheimastou-Potamianou, *Greek Art. Byzantine Wall-Paintings*. (Athens: Ekdotike Athenon, 1994), pl.70.
- 19 *Patrologia Graeca*. vol. 18. Col. 364 (сочинения Псевдо-Мефодия). See also: H. Belting "An Image and Its Function in the Liturgy: The Man of Sorrows in Byzantium", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vols. 34/35, (Washington D.C. 1980/1981), p. 10.
- 20 E.S. Smirnova, "Литургические образы в произведениях живописи (на примере иконы начала XIII в.)", *Византийский временник*, vol. 55 (80) (Moscow 1994), pp. 197-202.



Figure 14. Gospel Cover. End of the 16th century with later additions. From the Cathedral of Saint Sophia, Novgorod.



Figure 15. Gospel Cover. The central and corner plaques, Moscow 1639; the background, Novgorod 1660s. Novgorod Museum (from the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Novgorod).

under the figure and connected with the theme of the indestructible Christian city).<sup>21</sup>

There is, however, a considerable difference between comparisons in art of the Byzantine period and the devices of the post-Byzantine age when our icon was produced. Whereas in early monuments the images reproduced are “basic”, primary, tangible ones (cup, chalice), later ones, our icon among them, reproduce not the objects themselves, but representational motifs which have grown up in Christian art. What is repeated in our icon of Saint Nicholas is a long established structure with flying angels, and also the composition of the front cover of altar Gospels, which in turn contains an allusion to the outlines of the Cross. Identical features are found in other compositions that appeared

in Russian art of the 16th century and contain allusions to other images. Examples are representations of “Our Lady of the Burning Bush” (Figure 18), which include the symbolism of the star and halos with eight rays associated with the creative power of the Divine Wisdom.

The quoting of an old representational motif—its insertion in a new context with the aim of enriching the meaning of the new composition with additional allusions—which we find in the newly discovered icon of Saint Nicholas, is in keeping with the tradition of inventive iconographical production which appeared in 16th-century Russian icon painting and variations of the old Byzantine devices. What we have here is a case of orientation towards a “paradigm”, which A.M. Lidov pointed out using other examples.<sup>22</sup>

### The central representation

Let us now turn to the focus of the icon. We are struck by the apparent contrast between the central representation and what surrounds it. The figure of Saint Nicholas is serene, static, and relatively flat. The saint’s face is inspired and contemplative, yet at the same time aloof, his *phelonion* a dull flesh shade (Figure 4). Yet all the figures and scenes around the central image stand out in sharp relief and are full of movement and energy, shining with vivid, lively colors. As an explanation of this contrast we would advance the cautious hypothesis that the focal image of the icon contains an allusion to a specially revered image of Saint Nicholas. Its apparent abstraction and the devices for representing the figure differ from the rest of the painting and were intended to convey the specific nature of the central representation, to recall its prototype.

One unobtrusive detail, the rounded contour of the figure along the lower edge, suggests that in producing this new work the 16th-century master had in mind the so-called “round image” of Saint Nicholas, the wonder-working icon (“round board”) that, legend has it, floated to Novgorod from Kiev and healed Prince Mstislav Vladimirovich of Novgorod

21 S.S. Averintsev, “К уяснению смысла надписи над конхой центральной апсиды Софии Киевской”, *Древнерусское искусство. Художественная культура домонгольской Руси*, (Moscow: Nauka, 1972), pp. 25-49

22 A. Lidov, «Образы-парадигмы» как категория визуальной культуры, in: A. Lidov, *Иеромония. Пространственные иконы и образы-парадигмы в византийской культуры*. (Moscow, 2009), pp. 293-303.





Figure 16. (Top Left) Standing Virgin and Child. Fresco in the church of the Virgin Arakiotissa, Lagoudera, Cyprus, 1192.



Figure 17. (Above) The Virgin of the Sign (Virgin Orans). Yaroslavl, circa 1124. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



Figure 18. (Left) The Virgin of the Burning Bush. End of the 16th century. Kolomonskoe Museum, Moscow (from the Monastery in Solovki).

in 1113, to commemorate which the stone cathedral of Saint Nicholas was erected in the Novgorod Dvorishche.<sup>23</sup> In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, however, when our icon was executed, the wonder-working round image of Saint Nicholas was no longer in Novgorod. Its fate is described by late Novgorodian chronicles compiled in the 17<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of extremely valuable information not reflected in other documents. From the chronicle text we learn that in 1502 the Moscow Grand Prince Ivan Vasilievich (Ivan III) gave orders for the “wonder-working icon round panel of Nicholas the great miracle-worker” to be taken from Novgorod to Moscow, where it was placed in the Kremlin, in the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in the grand prince’s palace, which, it should be noted, contained other rare and valuable icons as well. Unfortunately there was a fire in the Kremlin in 1626 and the wonder-working icon of Saint Nicholas was burnt together with other valuables in the church.<sup>24</sup>

We can assume that, in accordance with tradition, copies were made of the wonder-working icon for Novgorodian churches while it was still in Novgorod, and also after it was taken to Moscow. From these copies, in turn, new copies could have been made, with changes in individual elements of the composition. Our icon is unlike the earliest of the surviving replicas, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century icon in the Novgorod Museum, in the type of face, the drawing of the robes, the contours of the hand raised in blessing and the form of the Gospel book.<sup>25</sup> Another icon, however, probably executed later than the one just mentioned, in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and renewed in the late 17<sup>th</sup> to early

23 S. E. Smirnova, “Круглая икона св. Николая Мирликийского из новгородского Николо-Дворищенского собора. Происхождение древнего образа и его место в контексте русской культуры XVI в.”, *Древнерусское искусство. Русское искусство Позднего Средневековья. XVI век.*, (St. Petersburg: Dmitriy Bulanin, 2003), pp. 314-340; E.A. Gordienko, “Икона святителя Николая на круглой доске из Никольского собора в Новгороде”, *Почитание святителя Николая Чудотворца и его отражение в фольклоре, письменности и искусстве*, (Moscow, 2007), pp. 111-116.

24 Уваровская летопись. Рукопись XVII в. БАН (Library of the Academy of Sciences of Russia, in St. Petersburg), 34.4. 1. Л. 488 об. – 489; Забелинская летопись. ГИМ (State Historical museum, Moscow), Забел. 261. Л. 408 об.; V.V. Yakovlev “Сказание об иконе Николая Чудотворца «круглая доска» и поздняя летописная традиция”, *Опыты по источниковедению. Древнерусская книжность. Сборник статей в честь В.К. Зиборова*, (St. Petersburg, 1997), pp. 139-140.

25 L. Nersessian, (ed). *Иконы Великого Новгорода XI – начала XVI века*, (Moscow: Severniy palomnik, 2008), Cat. 5.



Figure 19. The “Round Image” of Saint Nicholas. Replica of the second half of the 16th century with 17th and 18th century restorations. Novgorod Museum.

18<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 19), has several features in common with the image of the saint in our icon. These are the fine drawing of the hand raised in blessing, and the quite unusual form of the book, which is three-dimensional, with a protuberant round spine. These similarities can serve as indirect evidence that our newly discovered icon really does contain an allusion to the wonder-working Novgorodian “round image”, or rather to one of its copies.

Another special feature of our icon is the facial typology of Saint Nicholas of Myra. The bishop is depicted not as an elder, but almost middle-aged, with rare flecks of grey in his hair. The forehead is large, but not bulging, and the face is not round, as is usually the case, but slightly elongated. These features indicate the originality of the newly discovered icon and find a certain parallel in the aforementioned late copies of the wonder-working icon in the Novgorod Museum.

### Representations around the central panel

Unlike the central panel, regarding which we have voiced only cautious hypotheses, the representations around the central part of the icon allow us to offer a more confident explanation of their function. There can be no doubt that these figures and scenes are intended to emphasise the exceptionally high status of Saint Nicholas and the significance of his acts and miracles. Precisely this idea is revealed by the figures in the icon’s upper and middle zones and the scenes in its lower zone. The presentation of the episcopal insignia here by Christ and the Virgin Mary is duplicated by the insertion of the figures of angels carrying the insignia. It is interesting that, whereas the *omophorion* in the Virgin’s hands resembles the one carried by the angel and the one on the saint’s shoulders, the appearance of the Gospel varies: in Christ’s hands it has a red edge, in the angel’s a green edge, and in Saint Nicholas’ a white edge and a spine with an unusual pattern. The accentuation of the handing over of the insignia motif (the Nicene miracle) again suggests a Novgorodian context: the same motif is emphasised in the above-mentioned 1294 icon of Saint Nicholas from the church of Saint Nicholas on Lipno, although with different devices.

The choice of subjects from the saint’s numerous miracles and acts for the representations in the lower zone is noteworthy. They are rescuing and healing, one on water and the other on dry land. Both scenes recall the main direction of the saint’s activity, his assistance to people on the earth and on the sea. At the same time we would suggest cautiously that both miracles are indirectly and allegorically related to the history of the “round image” with its legendary journey by water from Kiev to Novgorod, its discovery on Lake Ilmen by the island of Lipno and the miraculous healing of Prince Mstislav Vladimirovich through the agency of this image. The considerable area allotted to the figures of the angels and the representations of the miracles (including the presentation of the insignia), the dynamism and vividness of these images surrounding the central figure, clearly reveal the icon’s special ideological intention: to present Saint Nicholas not only as a leading figure in the Christian Church, bishop of Myra in Lycia, but also as a worker of miracles.

Certain features permit us to hazard yet another, very cautious suggestion/hypothesis, namely that what we see in the newly discovered icon is “an icon within an icon.” The arrangement of angels’ figures, which seem to form an imaginary circle joined by





Figure 20. The Savior "Not Made By Hands"; Christ in the Tomb. Stroganov master Stephan Arefiev, beginning of the 17th century. Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg (from the Annunciation Cathedral in Solvytchegodsk).

the upper edge of the halo, and also the accentuated pattern of the angels' wings, all reinforce the allusion to the "round image" of Saint Nicholas and introduce into the composition the motif of the triumph and glorification not only of the saint himself, but also of his wonder-working Novgorodian icon, or rather of the prelate through the agency of his icon.

In this respect there is a certain similarity here to the iconography of the icon of Christ *Acheiropoietos*, "Not Made By Hands," where angels are depicted along the sides of the cloth or tile with the miraculous imprint of Christ's face. The earliest Russian composition of this kind is a miniature in the Novgorod manuscript of a 1262 (?) Prologue in the State Historical Museum, Хлуд. 187. This iconography became widespread in Russia. (Figure 20).

**Impulses encouraging the development of the new image. The veneration of wonder-working icons of Saint Nicholas in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The role of the struggle against Protestant tendencies**

The main and largest inscription on the icon, above Nicholas' halo, reads: НИКОЛАЕ ЧЮ[до]ТВОРЕЦЪ [Nicolas the Miracle worker] (Figure 21). The significance of this inscription can be appreciated only if we turn to the history of inscriptions on representations of the saint. Whereas hagiological and prayer texts originally denote the saint as a great miracle-worker, inscriptions on representations give the quite different definition of "Агиос" [agios], "Святой" [saint]. In Russian works up to and including the 15<sup>th</sup> century these two words are used in art with very rare exceptions. One such exception is the Novgorodian hagiographical icon of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century from the church of Saints Boris and Gleb in Plotniki (Novgorod Museum),<sup>26</sup> with the characteristic Novgorodian replacement of "ч" by "ц": НИКОЛАЕ ЦЮДОТВОРЕЦЪ [Nicholas the Miracle worker].

Figure 21. Inscription above the central image: НИКОЛАЕ ЧЮ[до]ТВОРЕЦЪ [Nicholas the Miracle Worker].



Such inscriptions did not begin to spread until the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and became prevalent roughly from the middle of the century, which was most evident in hagiographical icons, possibly because they contain numerous miracles by the saint.

Why did this new description of Nicholas (as a Wonderworker), previously used so rarely, become established in art? And why did so many hagiographical icons of him abound in scenes of miracles? What was behind the desire to create a new iconography of the saint emphasising his role as a wonder-worker sent from above?

Obviously the basic deep-rooted factors behind these changes lie in the development of religious feeling, in the desire to express new nuances in the veneration of the saint. The history of Russia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was marked not only by the intensity of political life, with its dramatic collisions, its cruelty, executions, destruction and the break with the old order, but also by the country's growth,

26 L. Nersessian, (ed). *Иконы Великого Новгорода XI – начала XVI века*, (Moscow: Severniy palomnik, 2008), Cat. 17.

the unprecedented development of the provinces, particularly the North and the area along the Volga. Similarly, in the sphere of culture this period is known not only for the forceful spreading of state ideology and the new iconographical variants produced in the workshops of the metropolitans and tsars, but also for the significance of local traditions, the absorbing of broad, popular ideas into church art.

Bearing these considerations in mind, we can assume that the general Russian glorification of local miracle-working icons of Saint Nicholas in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (for example, the image of Saint Nicholas of Velikoretsk in 1555), is explained not only by the initiative of Moscow, but also by the scale of the traditional veneration of this icon in the village near Vyatka.<sup>27</sup>

Alongside the increased veneration of icons of Saint Nicholas in the provinces there was the activity of the Moscow authorities, on whose orders certain early and specially revered icons of Saint Nicolas were removed to Moscow. They included the above-mentioned transfer of the “round icon” from Novgorod to a church in the grand prince’s palace in the Moscow Kremlin in 1502 and of the celebrated icon of the late 12<sup>th</sup> century often called “Nikola Novodevichy” (now in the State Tretyakov Gallery) from a church in Novgorod to the newly founded Novodevichy Convent in Moscow.<sup>28</sup> There is every reason to suppose that the hagiographical icon from the late 14<sup>th</sup> - early 15<sup>th</sup> century in the Assumption Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin known from old inventories as “Nikola Vezhitsky” is the Novgorodian wonder-working icon from the Vyazhishsky Monastery brought to Moscow with many other sacred relics from Novgorod in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>29</sup> The saint’s designation as wonder-worker naturally became increasingly popular, and the hagiographical cycle was enriched with more and more new scenes and details.

Yet to our mind there was another reason for the above-mentioned innovations in representations of Saint Nicholas, which lies in the intensification of the theological disputes that manifested themselves with special force in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The group of heretics opposed by the official Russian Church was led by a certain Matfey Bashkin, who was a boyar. In his views historians detect the influence of the ideology of the West European Reformation, while Bashkin himself said that he had got his ideas from the “Latins” in Lithuania.<sup>30</sup>

The struggle against these heretics grew more active in 1553 when supporters of the heresy, the former hegumen of the Trinity-Saint Sergius Monastery Artemiy, and also Perfir (Porfiry) Maloy and Sava Shakh, were invited to meet Tsar Ivan the Terrible and Metropolitan Macarius. In expounding their views, the heretics “blasphemed against all wonder-workers who believed in Christ and performed miracles, and mocked all rules and church councils” (i.e., viewed church rules and decisions of Church councils as empty

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27 Makhanko, M.A. “Икона св. Николы Великорецкого в коллекции Амброзиано Венето и почитание чудотворного образа в XVI в.”, *Памятники культуры. Новые открытия*. 1997, (Moscow, 1998), pp. 240-251.

28 Государственная Третьяковская галерея. Каталог собрания, том 1. Древнерусское искусство X-- начала XV века. Moscow 1995, cat. 9.

29 E.S. Smirnova, V.K. Laurina, E.A Gordienko. *Живопись Великого Новгорода. XV век.*, (Moscow, 1982), Cat. 5.

30 See, for example: A.I. Klibanov *Реформационные движения в России в XIV – первой половине XVI в.*, (Moscow, 1960). pp. 265-274; Archimandrite Makariy (Veretennikov). “Башкин Матвей Семенович”, *Православная энциклопедия*, vol. IV (*Афанасий – Бессмертие*), (Moscow, 2002), pp. 401-403.

babble).<sup>31</sup> The condemnation of heretics was assisted not only by verbal arguments, but also by an event that happened just when the discussion was at its height: “And while they were disputing about miracle-workers with Perfir, who swore that Nikola was an ordinary man, at that very time Nikola the Miracle-Worker of Gostun in his church by his image did forgive a boyar from Tula Grigoriy Sukhotin, who had not the use of his arms or legs; and at the prayer service he was straightway restored to health, whole and hearty”.<sup>32</sup> This miracle took place in the Moscow Kremlin in the Church of Saint Nicholas of Gostun (no longer extant) built in 1506 for an image of Saint Nicholas which had become famous shortly before this in the village of Gostun in former Kaluga province.<sup>33</sup>

From the chronicle text we learn that one of the most important points of dispute with the heretics was the veneration of Saint Nicholas. Denying miracles and miracle-workers as the Lutherans did, the heretics regarded Saint Nicholas as an ordinary mortal, but their delusion was straightway disproved by the miracle of the healing of the boyar.

The above-mentioned discussion has been used by historians of art to explain the remarkable enrichment of the hagiographical cycle of Nicholas in Russian icon painting of the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in particular the incredibly detailed representation of the “Miracle of the Patriarch Athanasius.” The latter had refused to consecrate an icon triptych commissioned by a devout townsman, which depicted Christ, the Virgin Mary and Saint Nicholas, because he regarded the bishop of Myra as an ordinary mortal unworthy of such company; subsequently, however, the patriarch was rescued at sea during a storm thanks to a prayer to Saint Nicholas, after which he recognized him as a saint and miracle-worker.<sup>34</sup> However the struggle against echoes of Lutheran views which had penetrated into Russia also explains other innovations in representations of Saint Nicholas, first and foremost, the spread of inscriptions with the word “miracle-worker.”

Russian documents of the 16<sup>th</sup> century also refer to other conflicts with Lutherans over the veneration of icons, in which again, a considerable role was played by the image of Saint Nicholas. In 1558 during the Livonian War waged by Ivan the Terrible, the town of Rugodiv (Narva) was captured by the Germans, but Muscovite troops managed to take it back. Their success was assisted by a fire for which the impious Germans were responsible: a certain *nemchin* (a European foreigner with no respect for Orthodox images) who was brewing beer cut up an icon of Saint Nicholas and cast it into the flames. This caused a fire to break out. The Moscow commanders broke into the town

31 “Никоновская летопись под 7061 (1553) г.” *Полное собрание русских летописей vol. XIII*, (Moscow 2000), p. 233.

32 *Ibid.* In all probability the miraculously healed Grigoriy Sukhotin was from the same branch of the Tula noble family of Sukhotins as the future husband of Tatyana Lvovna Tolstaya-Sukhotina, the elder daughter of Lev Tolstoy, whose estate of Yasnaya Polyana was also in Tula province.

33 “Воскресенская летопись под 1506 (7015) г.”, *Полное собрание русских летописей, vol. 8*, (Moscow, 2001), p. 247.

34 E.S Smirnova. “Икона Николы из Боровичей”, *Сообщения Государственного Русского музея. Issue no. 7*, (Leningrad, 1961), pp. 52-59.





Figure 22. A nemchin (German) in Narva (Rugodiva) throwing an icon of Saint Nicholas into the fire in order to brew beer. Fresco in the Church of Saint Nicholas in Yaroslavl, 1640.



Figure 23. Reception in Moscow of the holy icons saved in Narva (Rugodiva). The icon of Saint Nicholas is on the left among the representations of saints. Fresco in the Church of Saint Nicholas in Yaroslavl, 1640.

and discovered the icon of Saint Nicolas, as well as some other images, miraculously unharmed in the flames (Figures 22, 23).<sup>35</sup>

Mention must also be made of a charter sent in 1561 by the Ecumenical Patriarch Joasaph to Metropolitan Macarius. The text, which denounces the “sacrilegious Lutheran heresy,” is quoted in full in the official Nikon Chronicle. The charter, which was regarded in Russia as indisputable spiritual guidance, denounced the Lutheran denial of the veneration of holy icons, recalls the veneration of the earliest images of Christ (“the sacred sudarium, the image not made by hands acquired by King Abgar”) and the

Virgin Mary (“painted by Luke, preacher of the Word”), and the yearly feast day of the victory over the iconoclasts and the restoration of icon veneration in 843 (the “Triumph of Orthodoxy”), celebrated each year on the first Sunday in Lent.<sup>36</sup>

In this charter the Lutheran denial of the veneration of saints and their relics is rejected.<sup>37</sup> This motif in the polemics with the Protestants is related directly to the glorification of the most revered of saints, the Myra bishop and Wonder-worker Nicholas. The charter recalls that saints are prayerful intercessors before the Lord for devout Christians and that the Lord performs many miracles through their agency. With respect to our icon it is important that the charter also mentions angels who “through the grace of God... carry out holy wonders.” It is significant that in the composition of our icon we see the saintly miracle-worker, the Savior and the Virgin Mary who help him—through the agency of the angels, and the angels who “perform sacred wonders,” that is, take part in their performance. This is not to say that these religious polemics were reflected directly in Russian icon painting: the relationship between ideology and art was subtle, indirect.

The religious life of Western Europe, the teaching of Martin Luther and the ideas of the Counter Reformation would appear to be far removed from Muscovite Russia of the

35 Никоновская летопись под 7066 (1558) г., *Полное собрание русских летописей*, vol. XIII, (Moscow, 2000), p. 295. This story found artistic reflection in the frescoes of the church of Nadein’s Saint Nicholas in Yaroslavl, 1640 (see: E.A. Fedorycheva, *Церковь Николы Надеина в Ярославле*. (Moscow, 2003), p. 50. pl. 23, fig. IX (nos. 14-16). See reproductions in E.S. Smirnova, “Смотря на образ древних живописцев...”. *Тема почитания икон в искусстве Средневековой Руси*. (Moscow, 2007), pp. 212, 213.

36 The Nikon Chronicle under 7069 (1561) г., *Полное собрание русских летописей*, vol. XIII, (Moscow, 2000), pp. 337-338.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 338.



16<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless these conflicts were reflected in Russian iconography, not just in representations of Saint Nicholas, but in other subjects.<sup>38</sup>

It is quite likely that not only the inscription on our icon, but also its new iconography with a wreath of representations celebrating the image of the great miracle-worker, was determined by the religious atmosphere that developed in Russia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, by the urge to glorify the revered saint, and thus to resist the attacks of the heterodox.

### **Artistic features. Time and place of execution.**

The icon's precise structure, compositional symmetry and accentuation of the corners depend not only on the symbolical intention of the compilers of the iconographical program, who, as we have seen, made the composition resemble the cover of an altar Gospel and introduced other important associations, but also on the style of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the time when it was executed. In Russian painting of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, unlike the art of the earlier period, one often finds a strictly regulated structure, very different from unrestricted spontaneity. Yet in many other respects the icon is remarkably close to earlier Russian icon painting. The concentrated face of the central image reflects the great tradition of representing the wise Church Fathers in Byzantine and Russian art. The plastic form, expressive movements, rich colors and large figures in the corner representations, particularly the angels, three-dimensional, plastic, almost sculptural, recall vividly the images of 15<sup>th</sup>-century Novgorodian icons and through them even earlier ones, from the Byzantine classicism of the Paleologan age.

The very presence of the four angels, their significant role in the composition, the silhouettes of their unfurled, pointed wings also reflect the special features of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Russian painting, where the "angel theme" is often found. A good example is the mid-16<sup>th</sup>-century icon "Blessed be the Host of the King of Heaven" ("The Church Triumphant") from the Assumption Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin (Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery),<sup>39</sup> where multitudes of angels, the Virgin's messengers, are flying above the procession of holy warriors.

The most likely time when our icon was painted is the second quarter or middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The master who executed it was still far removed from the schematism that began to be found increasingly in Russian icon painting of the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is enough to look at the gradations of movement and the inner state of the figures. The Savior and Virgin Mary, serene in the heavenly heights, incline only slightly to lift the insignia, which seem incredibly light in their hands (Figures 5, 6 above). Their faces are finely drawn, their figures surrounded by pink festoons of clouds, and the

38 They made themselves felt, in particular, in Byzantine and later in Russian iconography of Saint Luke the Icon-painter. According to Byzantine tradition, in early times he was depicted in a serene pose, bent over like a scribe, a compiler of the Gospel. Under the influence of the Catholic world, however, which strove to reinforce the case for the holiness of the religious image, including the depiction of the Madonna posing and an angel helping the artist, new treatments also arose in Orthodox art. In Russian art the composition of Domenikos Theotokopoulos (El Greco) was reflected in an icon of 1560-1567, where Luke is depicted in the casual pose of the "artist" with an angel at the top in the clouds. Another new Russian version is also known—with the figure of the Virgin Mary from which Luke is painting his icon (E.S. Smirnova, "К вопросу об изображениях евангелиста Луки, пишущего икону Богородицы. Русские реплики поствизантийских образов", *Искусство христианского мира, Issue no. XI*, (Moscow, 2009), pp. 320-335).

39 V.I. Antonova, N.E. Мниова., *Государственная Третьяковская Галерея. Каталог древнерусской живописи. Опыт историко-художественной классификации, Vol. 2*, (Moscow, 1963), Cat. 521, pls. 37-41.

background of the heavens is decorated with gold stars and rosettes. The angels in the middle zone are heavy, with large facial features, their poses mobile and their knees bent. The same *omophorion* is held by the Virgin thoughtfully and by the angel below her, hands clasped, with a tense expression on its face.

The lower scenes (Figures 7, 8 above) are characterised even more sharply and expressively. On the left the sea swirls in spiral-shaped waves, the banks are cleaved by wedge-shaped fractures, the overturned boat is vertical, the white oars forming a cross and the drowning Demetrios stretches towards his angelic rescuer as if trying to walk up some invisible steps. In the right-hand scene we see the almost swaying figure of the youth possessed by an evil spirit, who is supported by his servant, friend, or a member of his household. The bushes stretch out their sharp leaves, as if in tense expectation. Yet grace is already descending on the sick man, and the black figure of the exorcised demon is fleeing towards a black cave.

The most expressive and striking feature of the lower scenes are the gestures of the angels, their contact with those they are saving. In both cases their agile figures are full of life, inspiration, while the figures of their “protagonists” are paralysed, awkward and stiff. According to the tradition of medieval (and not only medieval) Christian art, the motif of saving, helping, the flowing over of grace, was often depicted by hands touching. The angel in the left-hand scene is holding Demetrios firmly by the wrist, but the one in the scene on the right is only stretching out the fingers of its blessing hand to the sick man’s hand, so that if they do meet it is only the fingertips. By making use of this motif, the icon painter is, in effect, drawing on the same tradition that was used in the celebrated representation of the hands of the Creator and Adam stretched out towards each other in the painting in the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo.

The fact that the icon belongs to the artistic tradition of Novgorod the Great is evident at once: from the compressed composition, the decisive generalised contours and the heavy proportions of the angels’ bulky figures. There is also another sign of drawing on Novgorodian heritage, one that indicates knowledge of the archaic, popular, artistic layer in local icon painting of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This is the specifically stiff poses of the figures being saved—Demetrios and the youth possessed, the angular drawing of their figures, particularly their enlarged hands, and above all the gesture of the youth possessed, his raised hand with the palm facing the spectator. The unusual characterisation of these personages is intended to show that they belong to a different world, a sinful, sick, unenlightened world void of beauty and harmony. They have yet to pass into the world of grace, in accordance with the prayers of Saint Nicholas, as the inscriptions say. The raised palm of the youth possessed recalls vividly the gesture of “acclamation” which goes back to the art of late Antiquity and the early Christian period and denotes the receipt of information, its approval. A similar gesture is found in a marginal scene on the 14<sup>th</sup> century Novgorodian icon of “Saint Nicholas with Scenes from his Life” from the country church of Ozeryovo (Saint Petersburg, Russian Museum) depicting the “Cutting of the Tree” (or “Exorcism of the Demon from the Well”) (Figure 24).<sup>40</sup> The youth in this scene personifies all the inhabitants of the village, from which Saint Nicholas exorcised the evil spirit. He still has to enter the world of harmony and grace, hence his angular contours and stiff pose. He approves the coming changes, hence his gesture of approval.

Figure 24. The expulsion of the Devil from a Tree. Border detail from “Saint Nicholas of Myra with scenes from his life”. First half of the 15th century. Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg (from the hamlet of Ozeriovo).



40 I.D. Soloviova, (ed.). *Святой Николай Мирликийский в произведениях XII-XIX столетий из собрания Русского музея*, (St. Petersburg, 2006)



Figure 25. Detail of icon of the Apostles Peter and Paul with scenes from their lives. Middle of the 16th century. Novgorod Museum (from the Church of Peter and Paul in Kozhevniky in Novgorod).

Novgorodian tastes can also be seen in the icon's coloristic treatment. It is based on a combination of three main elements: red, green and gold, which dominated Novgorodian painting from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. These are supplemented by white (the thrice depicted *omophorion*, the robes of the youth possessed, and the highlights on the terraces of the hills), and a few mixed shades: for example, Nicholas' yellowish-green *phelonion*, Mary's purple-lilac robes and the grey rocky mounds. The use of gold is excellent and diverse: it is on the background, Nicholas' halo with the diamond-shaped ornament characteristic of Novgorod, and the exquisitely fine lines of gold hatching "*assist*" on Christ's robes, the Gospel binding (all three cases) and the angels' wings.

Reliable evidence of the icon's Novgorodian provenance is provided by the inscriptions. The one by the scene of the Healing of the Youth Possessed reads that the angel drove the «биса от чоловіка», instead of the «бѣса от челоуѣка». The use of "и" instead of "ѣ" in the words "бес" and "человек" is a characteristic sign of Novgorodian pronunciation in the mediaeval period. Similar pronunciation is also found in the Russian North in the 16<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>41</sup> but taking into account the icon's Novgorodian artistic features, the dialectical indications suggest that it was produced in Novgorod.

A relatively large number of Novgorodian icons have come down to us from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but they have not yet been properly studied or classified and very few have a precise or even an approximate date. Hence the difficulty in determining the circle of works to which the icon of Saint Nicholas belongs and the time when it was executed.

There is also a certain similarity with icons from the iconostasis of the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Kozhevniky (Novgorod Museum), which were executed either in the second quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century or, according to a different opinion, after the fire of 1558. If we take for means of comparison the icon of the "Apostles Peter and Paul with Scenes from their Lives" (Novgorod Museum) (Figure 25), it is painted with more refinement, elegance and care, with tracing of the details and small forms.<sup>42</sup> One cannot fail to see, however, the similarity between Saint Nicholas in our icon and the dignified and wise images of the Apostles Peter and Paul.

Our icon cannot be classified as a product of Novgorod's main workshop, which was in the archbishop's court. Many such 16<sup>th</sup>-century Novgorodian paintings have survived, including the large, multipartite iconostases from the Church of the Apostles Peter and Paul in Kozhevniky and the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in the Saint Anthony monastery (displayed in the Novgorod Museum). The colors used in these icons are bright and pure, always with an intense, rich tone. In the workshop where our icon was produced, however, the choice of pigments was more limited. The colors have a different tonality. The red is not vermillion, but a rather warm, pinkish tone. There are two

41 Anatoly Turilov (private communication).

42 E.V. Ignashina, Yu.B. Komarova, *Русская икона XI-XIX веков в собрании Новгородского музея. Путеводитель по экспозиции*, (Moscow, 2004), p. 85.





Figure 26. Saint Nicholas with angels and miracles. Second half of the 16th century. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (from the collection of A.V. Morozov).

Figure 27. Saint Nicholas with angels and miracles. Old Believer icon of the 19th century (?). Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg (from the collection of F.M. Plyushkin).



shades of green, warm (slightly yellowish) and cold (slightly bluish), which is obtained by mixing various components. Moreover, these paints, particularly the two shades of green, are thin and form an uneven layer that looks transparent in places. The artist's originality can be seen in the facial types, particularly those of the angels: they are large and full, with exaggeratedly round cheeks. The best example is the face of the angel from the middle zone of the composition (the Archangel Gabriel) who is bringing the saint his *omophorion* (Figure 7). The striking, powerful forms combined with the simplified technique of the painting reflect the popular taste and adherence to the old traditions evident in the hands of this outstanding and very individual icon-painter.

The theme of the veneration of saints, and Nicholas of Myra in particular, whose patronage of Novgorod manifested itself through his wonder-working "round image," was just as relevant in the 16th century as it was in early times. Iconoclastic tendencies often appeared in Novgorod and had to be firmly resisted whether this was at Novgorod's main workshop, or, as is probably the case with our icon, in a less courtly and wealthy milieu, perhaps in the periphery of the city. It reflected in its taste a more popular but no less potent faith in images and their meaning.

Hence, whether our icon is a copy of a no longer extant metropolitan Novgorodian work in which this new iconography of Saint Nicholas was manifested for the first time, we cannot say. And while it would be too speculative to claim this icon as the very archetype itself for this imagery of the saint, what we can say is that, at the present state of our knowledge, this newly discovered panel appears to be its earliest surviving representation.

Some later examples of "Saint Nicholas with Angels and Miracles" have survived but they are very few in number. One is an icon of the second half of the 16th century probably painted in the provinces of Novgorod, from the collection of A.V. Morozov (Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery) (Figure 26).<sup>43</sup> At 51 x 43 cm, its dimensions are very similar to our icon (54 x 42 cm), but there are changes in the painting, including a different configuration of the central part. A smaller icon in the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg (30.7 x 25.2 cm) looks like a work of the 19th century, possibly an "Old Believer" work.<sup>44</sup> It is quite possible that under the existing painting there may be traces of an earlier layer (Figure 27). This icon comes from the collection of F.M. Plyushkin, which was founded mainly in Pskov. It should be noted that both the above-mentioned icons retain an important feature: the rounded contour of the lower edge of the figure of Saint Nicholas.

A third icon<sup>45</sup>, measuring 49.5 x 38.5 cm belongs to the community of Old Believers in Samara (Figure 28).<sup>46</sup> The painting is under a darkened varnish and a later metal oklad and has been dated only approximately to the 17th-18th century. Finally, a cartoon

43 V.I. Antonova, N.E. Mniova, *Государственная Третьяковская Галерея. Каталог древнерусской живописи. Опыт историко-художественной классификации*, Vol. 2, (Moscow, 1963), Cat. 534, (not reproduced, Inv. no.13491). Established as a work from the middle of the 16th century produced in the tsar's workshop.

44 See: I.D. Soloviova, (ed). *Святой Николай Мирликийский в произведениях XII-XIX столетий из собрания Русского музея*, St. Petersburg 2006, Cat. 64, Inv.no. држ-514. In the Russian Museum, as the catalogue quoted says, there is another 19th-century icon, also from the collection of F.M. Plyushkin, with the same iconography, except that the angels are bringing the saint not the episcopal insignia, but the instruments of the Passion.

45 Alexander Preobrazhenskiy (personal communication).

46 P.V. Polovinkin, M.V. Kozhevnikova, (eds), *Старообрядчество Самарского края. История и культура*. (Samara, 2007), cat. 20, p. 19.



Figure 28. Saint Nicholas with angels and miracles. Old Believer icon of the 17th-18th century. Church of the Society of the Pomorskie Old Believers, Samara.



Figure 29. Saint Nicholas with angels and miracles. Cartoon from an icon. From the collection of the icon painter V.P. Gurianov.

from an icon (executed probably also in Old Believer circles) has survived. It is similar to ours, but with some differences and simplifications (there is no *omophorion* in the hands of the Mother of God, the contours of the mountains are slightly different and there is no accompanying figure by the possessed man) (Figure 29).<sup>47</sup> Other replicas of this iconographic type may exist in other collections, but there are unlikely to be many.

The high degree to which the saint's veneration was held in Russia is testified by the many iconographic types of Saint Nicholas in medieval Russian painting.

Some of these depictions which had come from Byzantium and were modified on Russian soil did not have special names (e.g., icons showing the saint half or full length and those surrounded with scenes from his life). Other variations were replicas of specific miracle-working icons venerated on Russian soil: Saint Nicholas of Zarahis (full-length figure with raised and outstretched arms, blessing with his right hand and holding the gospel with his left hand), Saint Nicholas of Mozhaish (with a sword and a model of a fortified town) and Saint Nicholas Velikoretsky (as a rule with eight scenes from his life). There were also certain miracle-working images about whose veneration we know only from written sources and whose iconography remains unknown to us (e.g., Saint Nicholas of Gostun, Saint Nicholas Lnyanoi).

Our icon, therefore, stands as an example of a rare and so far unidentified Russian iconographic type, unrecorded in scholarly literature and whose special characteristics have not been described until now.

In Novgorod a great many urban and monastic churches were dedicated to St. Nicholas, and consequently many of their most venerated and miracle-working icons depict the bishop of Myra. Thus, in a description of Novgorod compiled in 1860 by a great enthusiast of Novgorod ecclesiastical archaeology, a number of images of St. Nicholas are listed but there is no mention of an icon with the iconography "Saint Nicholas with Angels and Miracles."<sup>48</sup>

What is the reason for such a relatively small number of copies of this composition? Here we must bear in mind the distinguishing features of Novgorodian iconography.

47 A.I. Uspenskiy, *Переводы с древних икон, собранные и исполненные иконописцем и реставратором В. П. Гурьяновым*. (Moscow, 1902), pl. 80; G.V. Markelov, *Книга иконных образцов. 500 подлинных прорисей и переводов с русских икон XV–XIX веков*. 2nd ed. (Moscow, 2006), Vol. II, No. 372, pp. 280–281, 569.

48 The miracle-working "round" icon in the Saint Nicholas Dvorishensky cathedral, and also its replicas in the monastery of Saint Nicholas Biely, in the church of Saint Dimitriy Na Torgovoy Storone and in the Skovorodsky monastery (Arkhimandrit Makariy. *Археологическое описание описание церковных древностей в Новгороде и его окрестностях*, (Moscow, 1860), vol. 2, pp. 55–57, 114.); the previously mentioned biographical icon from the church of Saint Nicholas of the Vyazhishsky (*Ibid.*, p. 75.); the large icon of 1294 from the Saint Nicholas monastery on the island of Lipno; a more ancient version of this icon which used to be in the Mihailovsky Skovorodsky monastery which has not survived (*Ibid.*, pp. 77–78.); a half-length icon in the monastery of the Holy Spirit, which on a layer of later restoration has an inscription dated 1500 (*Ibid.*, p. 80.); a biographical icon of 1543 from the Saint Nicholas Rozvazhsky monastery and another five biographical icons in other churches (*Ibid.*, p. 81); the icon "amongst miracles" in the Novgorod Kremlin, in the Church of Saint John attached to the archbishop's palace, above the entrance in an oklad of 1665 (*Ibid.*, p. 86–87).



Figure 30. Saint Nicholas: the "Round Image" and scenes from its story. Second half of the 19th century. Recklinghausen Icon Museum (illustration taken from the article by E. Haustein-Bartsch)

The composition of certain celebrated icons, such as the large, 11<sup>th</sup>-century wonder-working image of "Our Savior of the Gold Riza" which was in the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia, is repeated and varied.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, two of Novgorod's most renowned wonder-working icons, "Our Lady of the Sign" and the "round image" of Saint Nicholas, have relatively few copies. The limited number of them contrasts sharply with the mass of extant copies of Moscow's wonder-working icons, such as "Our Lady of Vladimir" and "Our Lady of Tikhvin."

The reason is that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, i.e., the late mediaeval period, the cult and, therefore, the production of numerous copies of Moscow's wonder-working icons, above all "Our Lady of Vladimir," acquired a new impetus. Whereas in Novgorod, which suffered the removal of many of its sacred relics to Moscow following its incorporation into the state of Muscovy in 1478, the glorification of its own ancient images retained a more limited resonance.

Another important point is that our composition of "Saint Nicholas with Angels and Miracles" was, as we have assumed, not created until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and its popularisation was cut short by the events of 1570, when Novgorod was devastated once more, this time with special ruthlessness, by the troops of Ivan the Terrible.<sup>50</sup> This is perhaps the reason why the spread of this recently-developed iconographical type ceased and our icon remained one of its extremely rare examples.

In conclusion we would reiterate that some 19<sup>th</sup>-century icons depict the "round image" of Saint Nicholas from the Cathedral of Saint Nicholas in Yaroslav's Court and the story of its wondrous discovery and the miraculous healing of Prince Mstislav in the corners of the square board (Figure 30).<sup>51</sup> Do these compositions perhaps reflect memories of our icon "Saint Nicholas with Angels and Miracles"?

49 Other examples are the icon commissioned in 1337 by Archbishop Moisey of Novgorod (now in the Annunciation Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin with new painting but the same iconography); the icon of 1362 in the Nativity of the Virgin chapel of Novgorod's Hagia Sophia, commissioned either by Archbishop Moisey or, just as likely, by his successor Archbishop Alexiy; and a late 14th-century icon which is now in the iconostasis of the Assumption Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin.

50 E.A. Gordienko, *Новгород в XVI веке и его духовная жизнь*, (St. Petersburg, 2001), pp. 300-305.

51 M. Bacci, (ed). *San Nicola. Splendori d'arte d'Oriente e d'Occidente*, (Milan, 2006), cat. III. 2, p. 229, illustrated on p. 215 (author of the description Eva Haustein-Bartsch).





# VISUALITY AMONG CUBISM, ICONOGRAPHY, AND THEOSOPHY: PAVEL FLORENSKY'S THEORY OF ICONIC SPACE

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In the 1990s, two important publications attracted attention to the pervasive impact of Occultist teachings in Russian intellectual life. Both Maria Carlson's *"No Religion Higher Than Truth": A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875-1922* (1993) and the collection of essays, edited by Bernice Rosenthal, entitled *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (1997) leave the impression that Western Esotericism, in all its variants such as Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Spiritualism, etc., was far from a peripheral influence, confined to a limited group of eccentrically-minded intellectuals, as has been frequently assumed. What probably comes as a surprise in recent scholarship is the realization that Esotericism was a mainstream factor, which left untouched almost no aspect of the intellectual landscape in Russia. This is especially true of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The present paper considers the little known influence of Theosophical notions of visuality on Pavel Florensky's<sup>2</sup> (1882-1937) theory of iconic space.<sup>3</sup> Under "Theosophy" I will understand the movement created in 1875, which became known as the Theosophical Society, whose most influential representative was Helena Blavatsky.<sup>4</sup> What is probably the most insightful aspect of Florensky's position on the pictorial space of the medieval image in his essay "Reverse Perspective" (1919)<sup>5</sup> cannot be understood outside his Theosophically-derived notions of vision in an earlier work, *Smysl idealizma* (The Meaning of Idealism, 1914). The close connection between the two texts has not yet been noticed, but the importance of the icon for Florensky lies exactly in its ability to provide a model of vision at a higher level of existence. To use Florensky's own terminology, the

1 I thank the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) for their generous support, which allowed me to finish the research for this article.

2 In recent years, Pavel Florensky has been receiving increasing scholarly attention in Western scholarship. For the first time, there was a Florensky panel at the 2011 Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. Florensky's first biography in English appeared in 2010. See Avril Pyman, *Pavel Florensky: A Quiet Genius*, (New York and London: Continuum, 2010). For a brief intellectual biography, see my "Changing Perceptions of Pavel Florensky in Russian and Soviet Scholarship" in Sergei Oushakine and Costica Bradatan, (eds.), *In Marx's Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 73-95.

3 On the influence of occultism on Florensky's work in general, see L. I. Vasilenko, "O magii i okkul'tizme v nasledii Pavla Florenskogo" (On Magic and Occultism in the Heritage of Father Pavel Florensky), *Vestnik Pravoslavnogo Sviato-Tikhonovskogo Gumanitarnogo universiteta* 3 (2004), 81-99. I thank Natalia Golovnina for providing me with a copy of this article.

4 There is a useful outline of the Theosophical doctrine in Maria Carlson, *"No Religion Higher than Truth": A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875-1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 114-137.

5 For an overview of the different connotations of "reverse perspective", see my "On the Problem of 'Reverse Perspective': Definitions East and West", *Leonardo* 43.5 (2010), 464-470, in which I suggest that Florensky follows not one, as usually assumed, but several definitions of the term "reverse perspective."



“supplementary planes” of the medieval image can be interpreted as a visual analogue of “synthetic vision.”

The case of Florensky is, I believe, revealing of general tendencies that characterize the Russian reception of Theosophy. Florensky, an Orthodox priest and one of the foremost religious philosophers at the time, was not a Theosophist. More than that, he was consistently and openly hostile to the Theosophical Society and particularly the anti-Christian ideas underlying some, though not all, Theosophical writings. At the same time, he borrows directly Theosophical concepts and appears, in general, to be very well versed in Theosophical literature. A more careful reading shows that Florensky bent Theosophical ideas to serve his own ideological and intellectual purposes. Florensky’s Platonizing and Orthodoxizing of Theosophy are typical of a whole trend of Russian thought at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But what is particular to Florensky is that he utilized notions of viscosity, derived from Theosophy, specifically to explain the principle of pictorial space of the medieval icon, i.e. the so-called “reverse perspective.”

Florensky’s writings are also representative of another trend in Russian intellectual and artistic life at that time. As I will show, for Russian thinkers the similarity between modernism and medieval art was natural. Both were seen as providing models of viscosity that counteracted the prevalent epistemological model which underlay the modern, rationalistic worldview. Simply put, both the icon and avant-garde art were viewed as alternatives to the dominant Western, Renaissance and post-Renaissance image-making, realizing, in their own ways, the Symbolist dream of escaping “rational art.” In this sense, it was natural for Russian artists and thinkers to be attracted by various esoteric movements, which were invariably interpreted in the same light, i.e. as alternatives to rationalism and positivism.

In the first section of this paper, I consider analogies between image-making in medieval icons and avant-garde paintings at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I compare the construction of space in Cubist art, especially Analytical Cubism, and that in medieval Byzantine and medieval Russian images. Both Cubist theory and the Russian theory of the icon were informed by Theosophical notions of viscosity. The second section will focus on the Theosophical background of Florensky’s view of iconic space.

### **Between Orthodox Iconography and Avant-Garde Art**

The influence of Theosophy on avant-garde art is well known. As Roger Lipsey has stated, for a time Theosophy became “‘the dominant alternative culture’ and ‘the school’ towards which artists and seekers could look for a radically *other* description of man.”<sup>6</sup> According to Maria Carlson, “while no one would insist on Theosophy as a single cause in the development of modernism [...] the world conception promulgated by occult doctrines [is] one of the factors in the development of modernism.”<sup>7</sup> Linda Henderson’s

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6 Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art* (Boston: Shamhala Publications, 1988), 32-34. In her book, Sylvia Cranston pays some attention to the impact of the modern Theosophical Society and its founder Helena Blavatsky on Yeats, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, the Russian composer Scriabin, etc. See Sylvia Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Society* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1993).

7 Carlson, “*No Religion Higher than Truth*”, 192.

excellent *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* has drawn attention to the huge popularity of the concept of the fourth dimension, understood in its Theosophical connotation of a higher dimension, among the European avant-garde at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup>

In the Russian case, there are two figures, whose affiliations with Theosophy, expressed both in their writings and paintings, have received a great deal of scholarly attention—Vasilii Kandinsky<sup>9</sup> and Kazimir Malevich.<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising that the Russian avant-garde, as represented by these two artists, was receptive to Theosophical ideas, just as modern artists and thinkers in the West were at the time. What is specific to the Russian case, however, is that Theosophy entered an already on-going discourse on the medieval image. The rediscovery of the Russian icon had started in the middle and late 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup> and had acted since as a constant background motif in the evolution of Russian modernism. Thus, what is remarkable is that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Theosophical ideas were borrowed both in the context of avant-garde art and the theory of the icon by modern artists whose work was already strongly influenced by the iconic tradition and by critics who were responding both to the revival of the medieval image and to avant-garde experiments. It is this complex intellectual and artistic background which was unique to Russia.

The vital link between medieval icons and avant-garde images was almost immediately noticed by Russian intellectuals at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has recently been popularized in the West by Andrew Spira's wonderful book *The Avant-garde Icon: The Russian Avant-garde and the Icon Painting Tradition*.<sup>12</sup> Nikolai Punin, one of the foremost critics in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia, expressed his belief that “icons, in their magnificence and living beauty, will help contemporary art accomplish achievements which differ from those that have been influencing European art for the last few years.”<sup>13</sup> Alexander Benois, another influential writer, observed that “not only does any 14<sup>th</sup> century *Nicholas the Miracle Worker* or *Nativity of the Mother of God* help us understand Matisse, Picasso, Le Fauconnier and Goncharova; but through Matisse, Picasso,

8 Linda Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

9 See Sixten Ringbom, “Art in the ‘Epoch of the Great Spiritual’: Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966), 386-418; and by the same author, *The Sounding Cosmos. A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, (Abo, Finland: Abo Akademi, 1970). Also, Will Grohmann, *Kandinsky, Life and Work*, (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1958), 41.

10 See Charlotte Douglas, “Beyond Reason: Malevich, Matuishin, and Their Circle” in *The Spiritual in Modern Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*, ed. Maurice Tuchman et al., (Los Angeles, CA.: Abbeville Press, 1986).

11 Dmitrii Rovinski's *Istoriia russkikh shkol ikonopisanii do kontsa 17 v.* (History of the Russian Schools of Icon Painting up to the End of the 17th Century) (St. Petersburg, 1856) laid the foundations for a systematic study of Russian icon painting.

12 The more recent collection of essays, *The Avant-garde Icon: The Russian Avant-garde and Modernity*, edited by J. A. Gatrall and D. Greenfield, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), looks at the way that ideas that have been important in shaping modernity influenced the theory of the icon and avant-garde art; there is very little visual analysis of the sort that Spira provides. See also, Krieger, V., *Von der Ikone zur Utopie, Kunstkonzepte der russischen Avantgarde* (From the Icon to Utopia, the Concept of Art of the Russian Avant-garde), (Cologne: Bohlau, 1998).

13 Nikolai Punin, “Directions in Contemporary Art and Russian Icon Painting,” *Apollo*, (1913); English translation from Andrew Spira, *The Avant-garde Icon: The Russian Avant-garde and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Aldershot England: Lund Humphries, 2008), 81.

Le Fauconnier and Goncharova ... we feel greatly the beauty of these Byzantine pictures much better.”<sup>14</sup> Without doubt, the most significant study was Aleksei Grishchenko’s *O svyazakh russkoi zhivopisi s Vizantie i Zapadom XIII-XX vv.* (On the Connection between Russian Painting and Byzantium and the West, 13<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries; 1913), in which the author considers, among other things, the important role that the medieval icon played in the formation of Russian Cubo-Futurism.

Several ideas underlie these writings. First, Russian authors see in icons and modern art a common quality, which can best be described as a drive towards anti-illusionism. Anti-naturalism in modern art is a conscious reaction against what has been the prevalent mode of image-making in the West ever since the Renaissance. Second, in its turn, this common quality means that avant-garde art can make the viewer better aware of the value of the medieval icon. At the same time, because of their iconic tradition which gives them an outside perspective towards Western naturalistic art, Russians can appreciate modern art—both Russian and Western—in more intimate and meaningful ways. In this context, it comes as no surprise that practically all the great representatives of the Russian avant-garde were influenced by icon art, albeit to varying degrees. Some of them, such as Tatlin, had been initially trained as icon painters. Ljubov Popova, on the other hand, studied Cubism in Paris in 1912-1913 and, after going back to Russia, turned to icons. Artists like Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov, who were strongly influenced by Cubism at one point in their careers, increasingly acknowledged their indebtedness to the local tradition of the medieval image.<sup>15</sup> It is Malevich, however, who was probably “influenced by icons more radically than any other avant-garde artist.”<sup>16</sup> This is how Anatolii Lunacharsky, the Bolshevik Commisar of Enlightenment, summarized Malevich’s artistic development: “Malevich began by imitating icons [...] went on to make his own icons even more like toys [...] (under the influence) of the Cubists (Malevich most closely resembled Picabia at this period).”<sup>17</sup>

In his book, Spira makes convincing comparative visual analyses of modern paintings by the Russian avant-garde alongside medieval images, which directly or indirectly informed the compositional schemes and/or techniques of the modern works.<sup>18</sup> His conclusion that “the art of the avant-garde often showed striking similarities to icons”<sup>19</sup> is, in this way, well supported by rich visual material. In the present text, I will focus on the theories of spatial construction in icons and Cubist images before moving to their common background in Theosophical notions of visibility. Two of Florensky’s texts are particularly relevant here—the little known *Smysl idealizma* (The Meaning of Idealism;

14 Alexander Benois, “Letters on Art: Icons and Modern Art,” *Rech’*, (1913); English translation from Spira, *The Avant-garde Icon*, 120.

15 See Mikhail Larionov, “Les Icones” (c.1920), in Mikhail Larionov et al., *Une Avant-garde explosive* (Lausanne: Edition L’Age d’homme, 1978).

16 Spira, *The Avant-garde Icon*, 66.

17 Spira, *The Avant-garde Icon*, 69.

18 See especially the chapter: “Iconic Techniques of the Avant-garde,” 47-127.

19 Spira, *The Avant-garde Icon*, 8.



Figure 1. *The Prayer of Anne*,  
Kahriye Camii, Istanbul,  
14<sup>th</sup> c. mosaic.

1914)<sup>20</sup> with a focus on the sections referring to Picasso's paintings of musical instruments, and the opening paragraphs of the classic essay "Reverse Perspective" (written in 1919),<sup>21</sup> dealing with the "supplementary planes" of the medieval icon.

In his analysis of the Picasso works that could be seen at the Shchukin Collection in Moscow at the time, Florensky says that "the reality of the artistic image is realized in [...] unifying in one apperception that which is given in different moments and, consequently, under different angles of vision."<sup>22</sup> He cites Grishchenko, who had considered the same Picasso pieces, and quotes: "The division of the object into parts becomes a necessary element in Picasso's paintings [...] We see the represented object from several points of view."<sup>23</sup> The terms sound inescapably close to the opening sections of "Reverse Perspective," according to which one of the fundamental features of the organization of iconic space lies in the representation of "parts and surfaces [of the same object] which cannot be seen simultaneously"<sup>24</sup> from a fixed position. This phenomenon is especially noticeable in treatments of architecture in icons. Lateral sides of buildings in Byzantine and ancient Russian art

are frequently represented frontally alongside a building's facade. For example, Figure 1 shows the lateral sides of the well before which St. Anne is standing alongside the front and the back aspects of the structure. This image is a good illustration of Florensky's contribution to the theory of iconic space since it can be read in two completely different ways. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a "reverse perspective" construction in the sense of turning around the laws of standard, linear perspective. According to this view, followed by Florensky in some passages of his essay, the parallel lines of objects are represented as diverging, rather than converging, in the distance. In this case, the lateral sides of the well are clearly diverging (while with linear perspective they would be converging towards a vanishing point). However, the side aspects of the object can also be read as "supplementary planes" without any reference to linear pictorial space, a system of representation invented only in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> Not only are the "supplementary planes" of the object represented—i.e., the ones that should not be there according

20 *The Meaning of Idealism* is available only in Russian at the moment and is, as a result, little known to the Western public. In Russia, on the other hand, it seems to have been largely overshadowed by another work by Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of Truth*, which appeared in the same year. This is worthwhile noticing in the context of our discussion, as it is in *The Meaning of Idealism* that Florensky's debt to Theosophy and interest in Occultism are most obvious.

21 There is an English translation of this essay in Pavel Florensky, *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler (London: Reaktion, 2002). For a critical commentary, see Clemena Antonova and Martin Kemp, "'Reverse Perspective': Historical Fallacies and an Alternative View," in *The Visual Mind II*, ed. Michele Emmer, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 524-566.

22 Pavel Florensky, *Smysl idealizma* (The Meaning of Idealism) in his *Sochineniia v chetirekh tomakh* (Works in Four Volumes), vol. 3 (Moscow: "Mysl", 1999), 98; my translation.

23 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 102.

24 Pavel Florensky, "Reverse Perspective" in his *Beyond Vision*, 201.

25 For the unsustainability of the contrast between linear and reverse perspective, see my joint paper with Martin Kemp, "'Reverse Perspective': Historical Fallacies and an Alternative View."



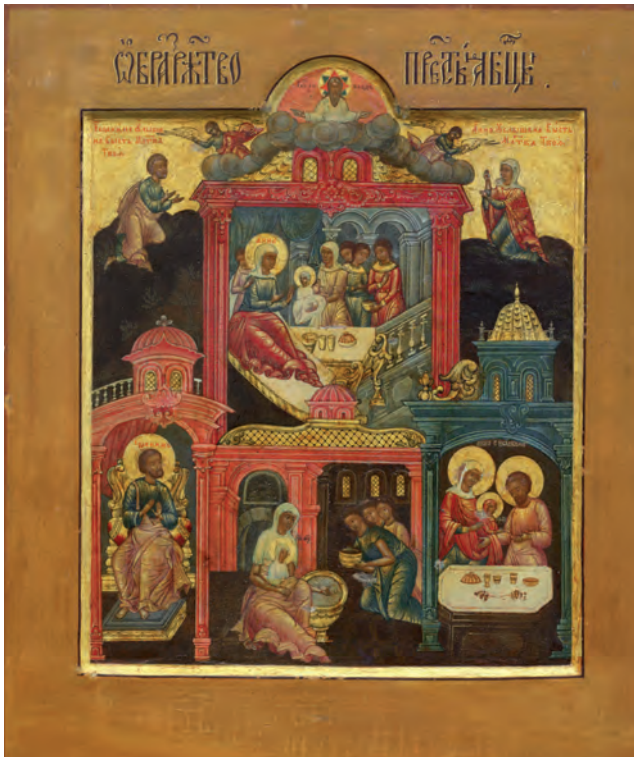


Figure 2. *Nativity of the Mother of God*, Museum of Russian Icons, Accession # 2011.39a.



Figure 3 (detail). Water basin shows "reverse perspective" understood as "supplementary planes."

to the laws of normal vision at a single moment of time—but they are frequently, as Florensky notices, emphasized by means of color. These "additional"/"supplementary" surfaces are often painted in strikingly bright colors that capture the attention.

Similarly, in a 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian icon of the *Nativity of the Mother of God* (Figure 2), a very complex pictorial space is filled with objects constructed according to the principle of "supplementary planes." Below, on the viewer's left, a saint is resting his feet on a foot-stool. The sides of the foot-stool are represented almost as parallel in the same manner as the table in the lower right corner of the image. Both the table and the water basin in the central section presuppose a side view—which reveals the legs of the table and the stand of the basin—alongside a bird's eye perspective—which shows the sides of the table as almost parallel to each other and the top of the basin as a circle (See Figure 3). The spatial treatment of all these objects is made possible by the representation of aspects of the object which could not be seen at the same time.

In other words, Florensky took up a well-known characteristic of Cubist image-making and applied it, for the first time, to the theory of iconic space. It should be noticed that Florensky's notion of Cubism is restricted to early, Analytical Cubism, and so most of the Cubist works of the later phase would fall outside the range of his analysis. That the "multiple planes" of some Cubist images refer to "the simultaneous representation of entirely different viewpoints, the sum total of which constitutes the object"<sup>26</sup> was already noticed by Cubist artists and theorists. Thus, Jean Metzinger, the Cubist painter, describes the principle of constructing pictorial space as if "[Cubists] have allowed themselves to move round the object, in order to give [...] a concrete representation of it, made up of several successive aspects."<sup>27</sup> This is, indeed, one way in which we can make sense of Cubist pictorial space—the "multiple planes" of the image are the result of the synthesized representation of various aspects of the object which would be revealed in the process of a successive vision, i.e. as the viewer moves around the object. What is significant with Florensky is his proposition that this principle of constructing pictorial space existed before the advent of modernism—it is a key characteristic of the art of the medieval icon. This notion was restated later on by other Russian authors in their writings on "reverse perspective," i.e. the principle of iconic space. It is very little known in Western scholarship, while, as was mentioned earlier, it could very well represent, if properly developed, a genuine breakthrough in the field's thinking on a highly understudied topic.

Borrowing an early 20<sup>th</sup> century theory, which was worked out to explain contemporary developments in art practice, and applying it to a medieval phenomenon, is potentially problematical. But, at the same time, what made this connection possible is the

26 Arthur Miller, *Einstein, Picasso: Space, Time and the Beauty That Causes Havoc* (New York: BasicBooks, 2001), 106.

27 Jean Metzinger, "Cubisme et tradition," *Paris Journal*, 16 August 1911, rpt. in *Cubism*, ed. Edward Fry (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 66-67.

Theosophical background against which both Cubist art and iconography were placed at the time. One truly needs to be aware of Florensky's specific interpretation of Theosophy, in terms of a *longe dureé* of a Platonic and ancient magical worldview, to understand his views of iconic space.

### Between Theosophical Vision and Iconic Space

When Florensky discussed Picasso's paintings of musical instruments in the context of Theosophical notions of visibility, he was referring to a familiar leitmotif. The influence of Theosophy on Cubism was acknowledged at the time and has been established since.<sup>28</sup> Arthur Miller has interpreted the combination of profile and frontal aspects of the squatting female figure in Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* in terms of the "astral plane" of Theosophy. It is "as if Picasso imagined himself sitting on the 'astral plane'," <sup>29</sup> at which "one sees all sides of an object at once."<sup>30</sup> This is how we can understand Braque's concern with the role of painting to exhibit the "full possession of things," a task in which traditional perspective had failed as it showed the object only from one, limited point of view.<sup>31</sup> André Lhote, a member of Picasso's circle in Paris, talks in a similar vein of modern art's ability to "express the table as a type (*la table type*)."<sup>32</sup>

In Theosophy, the astral plane represents a higher dimension of existence. It refers, in Petr Uspensky's words, to "a consciousness that is not bound by the conditions of sensuous receptivity" and that "can rise above the plane upon which we are moving."<sup>33</sup> On this plane of existence, vision operates according to different, higher laws. "Astral vision" "can see the past and the future, lying together and existing simultaneously."<sup>34</sup> It corresponds to "a receptivity which is on a level higher than our consciousness, possessing a broader angle of vision."<sup>35</sup> This is the background of Florensky's notion of "synthetic vision" in *Smysl idealizma* (The Meaning of Idealism), which he discusses explicitly in the context of Theosophy and more specifically in the writings of the British Theosophist Charles Hinton (1853-1907) cited from Uspensky's book *Tertium Organum* (1911). "Synthetic vision" refers to the ability of the clairvoyant to see an object simultaneously from all sides, rather than from one single point of view as happens in natural vision. Florensky's later essay on "reverse perspective," on the other hand, makes no direct mention of Theosophy, but it makes a clear, though not explicitly acknowledged, connection with the Theosophy-inspired notion of "synthetic vision" from the earlier book.

The principle of the construction of space in the medieval icon, i.e. the "supplementary planes" in the figures discussed above, could be convincingly interpreted as a visual analogue of the concept of "synthetic vision," so long as it refers to the simultaneous representation of aspects of an object which cannot be seen from one point of view at a

28 Tom Gibbons, "Cubism and the Fourth Dimension in the Context of Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Revival of Occult Idealism", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 44 (1981), 130-147.

29 Miller, *Einstein, Picasso*, 106.

30 Miller, *Einstein, Picasso*, 104.

31 Dora Vallier, "Braque, la peinture et nous: Propos de l'artiste recueillis", *Cahiers d'art*, I (1954), 14.

32 Cited in Miller, *Einstein, Picasso*, 114-115.

33 Petr Uspensky, *Tertium organum: The Third Canon of Thought*, tr. N. Bessaraboff and C. Bragdon, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 42.

34 Uspensky, *Tertium organum*, 42.

35 Uspensky, *Tertium organum*, 48.

moment of time. It is only when we make the connection between Florensky's two texts that we are able to see the icon as a model of "synthetic vision." It is here that a great deal of the importance that Florensky places on the image is to be attributed. In other words, the icon is of value precisely because it provides a visual model of "synthetic" visuality.

In her introduction to the English translation of a collection of Florensky's articles on art, Nicoletta Misler suggests that the first part of the essay on "reverse perspective" is an exploration of "transparent vision,"<sup>36</sup> a notion popularized by Theosophical writings. A clairvoyant can exercise a sort of supernatural vision by seeing through opaque objects. To him/her - if not to the rest of us - these objects are transparent. None of Florensky's examples in "Reverse Perspective"—the text under discussion by Misler—actually confirm this view, as no internal surfaces of objects are represented. In the earlier *Meaning of Idealism*, however, Florensky does cite Hinton's famous example of the cube, which had also appeared in Uspensky. In Florensky's words, a synthetic perception of the cube would reveal a sense of the cube "as a whole, both inside and out." It would be analogous, Florensky says, to our perception when viewing all sides of the cube successively, i.e. when the cube is turned around along its six sides.<sup>37</sup> Whether called "four-dimensional vision" (Charles Hinton)<sup>38</sup> or "astral vision" (Charles Leadbeater),<sup>39</sup> the problem for Theosophists always comes down to the possibility of developing a perception that discloses the transcendent and the infinite in the material and finite. The vision of the clairvoyant is "transparent," but more importantly it shows an object "as if it were, from all sides at once."<sup>40</sup> It is this latter characteristic, the lack of a single perspective stance, that bears comparison to what happens with space in the icon.

While in *The Meaning of Idealism* Florensky's point of departure in the discussion of "synthetic vision" is specifically Hinton's writings and Picasso's paintings, and in "Reverse Perspective" it is the icon, it is clear that a distinction exists in Florensky's mind. In Florensky's view, the transition to higher forms of consciousness in Hinton's project of "higher consciousness" and in Cubist art is forced and artificial since it is not the result of the development of the individual who at a certain level of spiritual evolution naturally attains "synthetic vision." The latter is part of that Platonic understanding of the world and man which underlies Christianity.<sup>41</sup> In the Platonic-Christian worldview, synthetic vision would be only possible when man's "spiritual vision" acquires the power to go beyond the "fleshly" (*plotskii*) sensible world.<sup>42</sup>

The whole emphasis of Florensky's text moves away from the concrete instances of Theosophy and Cubism, which had provided the starting ground for the discussion of "synthetic vision," and goes back to the author's larger topic of idealism, specifically Platonic idealism. The possibility of developing a "new habit of seeing" (Plato, *Republic*, 517 E), a problem that interested the Theosophists, too, Florensky sees as already posed by Plato, most famously in the myth of the cave as—What does it mean "to see the ideas?"

36 Nicoletta Misler, "Pavel Florensky as Art Historian," in Florensky, *Beyond Vision*, 84-85.

37 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 98.

38 Hinton's earliest publication on the subject is "What Is the Fourth Dimension?" *Dublin University Magazine*, 1880, 15-34.

39 Charles Leadbeater, *The Astral Plane* (London: Lond. & c., 1895).

40 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 3-4.

41 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 99ff.

42 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 114.

His reply comes down to the notion that man has to develop his spiritual “capacity for mystical contemplation” and his ability to see Platonic Ideas “directly, face to face.”<sup>43</sup> The images revealed to man in this process of “mystical contemplation” are defined as four-dimensional—the terminology sounds inescapably close to Theosophy—and, as such, possessing “a higher degree of reality.”<sup>44</sup> This thinking, according to the Russian author, lies at the basis of a “generic method of looking at the world,” which is interested in the phenomenon “as a whole” and not only in “one moment of its history.”<sup>45</sup> Modern man has lost exactly this ability to experience “the world as a unified being.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, if art has a mission, it consists in restoring to humanity the ability to “see the wood behind the trees.”<sup>47</sup> This is the meaning of “synthetic vision,” and the principle of “supplementary planes” provides a visual expression of it.

Florensky’s passages on “synthetic vision” make direct references to Theosophical literature. At the same time, the author’s main concern is with putting the whole discussion within a framework that looks back to Plato’s philosophy and before. When Florensky poses the question: “Where does Platonism come from?” his answer is from magic or occultism.<sup>48</sup> This view acquires further significance against the background of Florensky’s understanding of Christianity as the heir of Platonism. The idea that Platonism derives from magic and occultism on the one hand and leads to Christianity on the other, had haunted Florensky for a long time and was to become a permanent feature of his thought. Already in his lecture of 17 September 1908 at the Theological Academy in Moscow, he speaks of his “thesis of the origin of Platonism from the magical world-view”<sup>49</sup> and of “the continuity of our spiritual culture from Platonism.”<sup>50</sup> This thesis, which defines Florensky’s worldview, is very probably one of the most interesting and most controversial aspects of the Russian writer’s oeuvre. Vasilenko has drawn attention to the problem of Florensky’s understanding of magic<sup>51</sup> which begs the urgent question of the way in which magic or occultism fit into a profoundly Christian Orthodox sensibility. These issues still await further study.

## Conclusion

This paper looked at a concrete and little known case of the influence of Theosophy in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia. Pavel Florensky’s concept of the “supplementary planes” of the icon in his classic essay “Reverse Perspective” grew out of the Theosophically-inspired notion of “synthetic vision” in *Smysl idealizma*, one of his less familiar texts.

Several themes emerged in the course of the discussion. Firstly, it was suggested that there is a tripartite connection between Theosophy, Orthodox iconography, and modernism,

43 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 13.

44 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 108.

45 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 110.

46 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 108.

47 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 115.

48 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 147.

49 Florensky, “Obshchechelovecheskie korni idealizma” (The Universal Roots of Idealism; 1908) in Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 148.

50 Florensky, *Smysl idealizma*, 145.

51 Vasilenko, “O magii i okkul’tizme,” 86.



which is unique to Russia. In many ways, Theosophical concepts formed the bridge between Orthodox iconography and modernism. This is especially true of the similarities in the construction of pictorial space in Cubist images, on the one hand, and in medieval painting on the other. Florensky's two texts under discussion can only be understood by taking into account Theosophical notions of visuality.

Secondly, Florensky's application of ideas deriving from Theosophical writings, popular at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reflects a typically Russian reception of Theosophy. In the process, Theosophical notions become "Orthodoxized," i.e. they become part of a process which is profoundly Christian Orthodox.

## A TERATOLOGICAL SOURCE OF HELLHEAD

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### Summary<sup>1</sup>

A group of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Russian icons of the *Resurrection and Descent into Hell* have an interesting depiction of Hell. It is a creature with a face that is human-like but with an opening on the top of its head from which the righteous exit Hell. We call this creature “Hellhead.” We have found what we think is the source for this creature in a medieval Russian novel about Alexander the Great, called *Александрия* [Aleksandriya].

Here are three examples of Hellhead in icons in the collection of the Museum of Russian Icons<sup>2</sup> (Figures 1-3).

Detail of Hellhead  
(left to right):

Figure 1. *Resurrection and Descent*, circa 1650.  
MRI #2011.90

Figure 2. *Descent*, late 17<sup>th</sup>  
century. MRI #2012.49

Figure 3. *Resurrection and Descent*, circa 1580.  
MRI #2001.4



### Introduction

Demons appear mainly in five icon types:

- Resurrection and Descent into Hell,
- The Last Judgment,
- Saint John Climacus and the Ladder of Divine Ascent,
- Icons of warrior saints such as Saints George and Nikita, and
- In kleyma (border scenes) in vita icons.

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and Eastern European Languages, in Boston, in January 2013. We wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout, we use the abbreviation MRI for the Museum of Russian Icons.

Figure 4. Detail of *Ladder of Divine Ascent* from the Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai

Figure 5. *Saint John Climacus (of the Ladder)*, circa 1650. MRI #R2007.43



Figure 6. Bulgarian icon of the Descent.



Figure 7. Cairene Coptic icon of Saint Marina

Very little research has been done on the representation of demons in icons however. This is understandable since most icons are hagiographic, not demonographic. An exception to this fact is an excellent recent book by Antonov and Mayzul's<sup>3</sup>. The principal focus of the book is not on panel icons, however, but on illustrations in manuscripts. Although there are similarities between the two media, they are different—for example, panel texts can allow for much larger, more detailed images and, therefore, can represent much larger narratives—and their functions are different. Consequently so is the iconography.

There is not much said about how to paint demons in icon painting manuals. Dionysius of Fournia (circa 1670-1745/6), for example, in his *Painter's Manual*<sup>4</sup> nowhere elaborates on the depiction of 'demon.' Only when commenting on the Book of Revelation does he quote the Bible for a teratological description: "before her a red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and wearing seven crowns." and later "I beheld another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb." Similarly, Boris Uspensky in his *Semiotics of the Icon*<sup>5</sup> mentions demons only in a footnote dealing with devils painted in profile.

The prototypical demon in pre-15<sup>th</sup> century Russian icons is typically an anthropomorphic bat with a black body, bat-wings, hooked nose, and tufted hair imitating those in the classic 12<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine icon of Saint John Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*

3 Антонов, Дмитрий Игоревич и Михаил Романович Майзульс. 2011. *Демоны и грешники в древнерусской иконографии: Семиотика образа*, [Demony i Greshniki v Drevnerusskoy Ikonografii—Semiotika Obraza, Demons and Sinners in Old Russian Iconography—The Semiotics of the Image] Moscow: Indrik, 2011.

4 *The 'Painter's Manual' of Dionysius of Fournia* translated by Paul Hetherington 1974, reprinted 1996, Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications.

5 Uspensky, Boris *Semiotics of the Icon*. Lisse: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1976, fn. P. 74. Uspensky has recently expressed interest in the topic, however, by his participation in a recent conference on demons. See Антонов Д. Т. и Христофорова О. Б. *In Umbra: Демонология как семиотическая система. Альманах I*. Москва: Издательский центр Российского государственного гуманитарного университета, 2012, pp. 17-65.





Figure 8. *Resurrection and Descent*, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.  
MRI #2012.55

from Saint Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai<sup>6</sup> where demons are portrayed as trying to pull monks from the ladder leading to Paradise, so that they fall into Hell (Figure 4). An interpretation of that iconography appears in another MRI icon (Figure 5).

Similarly this form of representation of a demon continued at least into the 18<sup>th</sup> century as exemplified in a Bulgarian icon of the *Descent* (Figure 6)<sup>7</sup> and a Cairene Coptic icon of Saint Marina from 1569 AM (Anno Martyrum = 1852 CE) (Figure 7).<sup>8</sup>

## Depictions of Hell

The Museum of Russian Icons has acquired an icon of the *Resurrection and Descent into Hell* which portrays demons in a much wider variety of ways (Figure 10, see page 4). In particular, the lower left quadrant of this icon contains a description of Hell that focuses on its portrayal with strikingly different and diverse forms than 'classic' demons.

In this icon and other *Descent into Hell*<sup>9</sup> icons, in both Western and Eastern icons, Hell is typically displayed in the lower left-hand corner and is represented as an open mouth, with or without teeth, usually with one eye, in a sagittal cross-section (Figure 8). And so it is with Western ones, such as the early 15<sup>th</sup> century miniature of *The Last Judgment*<sup>10</sup> (Figure 9).

Such representations of Hell are referred to as "Hellmouth" and are meant to represent the whale in the tale of Jonah. The whale expels Jonah from its mouth<sup>11</sup>, and hence the mouth shape.

The MRI icons (Figures 1-3, 10) have other Russian 'cousins' from the same period with similar representations of Hell. Their shared features include a geometrical shape for the walls of Paradise, rather than the more typical straight wall with church buildings in front of it; a narration of the ascent of the Good Thief, Saint Dismas, into Paradise; a demon with a long tongue; and other iconographical similarities. These suggest similarity of temporal and regional commonality as with two icons from the Yaroslavl Museum.



Figure 9. Miniature of *The Last Judgment*

6 Rossi, Corina. *The Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*. Vercelli, Italy: White Star Publishers, 2006. P. 107.

7 Matakiewa-Lilkova, Teofana. *Icons in Bulgaria*. Sofia: Borina Publishing House, 1994. P. 152.

8 *Coptic icons, Part I*. Cairo: Lehrert and Landroch, 1998. P. 94.

9 We are focusing solely on the representation of Hell in this paper. We will be studying the remaining demons in this icon in future studies.

10 From the Last Judgment scene (29) in *The Très Riches Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry* New York: George Braziller, 1969, n.p.

11 Matthew 12:40.





Figure 10. *Resurrection and Descent into Hell*. MRI #2011.90. See Figure 1 for Hellhead detail.





(left to right): Figure 11.  
Yaroslavl. Third quarter of  
the 16th century. Figure 12.  
Yaroslavl. Late 16th century.  
Figure 13. Vladimir-Suzdal.



Figure 11a. Detail of Hellhead



Figure 12a. Detail of Hellhead

The first<sup>12</sup> (Figure 11) is dated from the third quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Notice the very similar iconography to MRI #2011.90 (Figure 10)—but without the opening in its head (Figure 11a)—and it has the geometrical representation of Paradise, a demon with long tongue, and other attributes. Similarly, the second (Figure 12), also from Yaroslavl, has this creature (Figure 12a), but with the additional two participants of the ‘trinity of the damned,’<sup>13</sup> that is, it holds the devil who, in turn, holds Judas on his lap.

And, still another one, from a museum in Vladimir-Suzdal<sup>14</sup> has the ‘trinity of the damned’ with kleyma (Figure 13). As mentioned earlier, contrary to previous representations of the *Resurrection and Descent into Hell*, the MRI icons (Figure 1-3, 8) and icons in Figures 11-13, among others, establish a new icon type depicting another portion of the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus on which it is based, namely the rising of the good thief into Paradise. So the narrative structure of this icon consists of two streams, both, appropriately, upward towards Paradise. One stream is of Christ’s descent and rising and his raising of the righteous. The other is of the good thief’s journey rising toward and into Paradise.<sup>15</sup>

## Hellhead

With this as background information, our focus is the portrayal of Hell in this new icon type. Hell is portrayed in two ways in these icons. Firstly, as a large black, seemingly

<sup>12</sup> Yaroslavl Icons of the 13<sup>th</sup> mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, Vol. I, Moscow: Северный Паломник, 2009, p.357.

<sup>13</sup> A term coined by Dmitriy Antonov (personal communication).

<sup>14</sup> *Ikony Vladimira i Suzdalia* [Icons of Vladimir and Suzdal’], ed. M. A. Bykova. Moscow: Severnyi palomnik, 2006, p.247.

<sup>15</sup> Descent and Resurrection icons describe both the rising of Christ as well as the rising of the righteous and that is why they are called ‘Anastasis’ icons in Greek, that is ‘rising’ icons. See Anna D. Kartsonis’ seminal work *Anastasis-The Making of an Image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

empty cave, and secondly, it is ‘personified’ as a red creature, looking like a human in many ways but with two or more eyes and an opening in its head out of which the righteous arise. We have called this creature “Hellhead.”<sup>16</sup>

The question naturally arises of why are there two representations of Hell in these icons? The representation of Hell as a dark cavern is traditional and is based on biblical texts.<sup>17</sup> But in this type of icon there is also the necessity for a representation of Hell as a human-like creature. The reason for this is that descriptive details of the descent into Hell originate from the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus. And, in that gospel Hell speaks a great deal, describing the descent, and so this creature needs an orifice for releasing and expelling the righteous as well as a mouth for simultaneously speaking (Figure 1).

Of particular interest in the features of this ‘personified’ Hell are:

- It is represented twice—once as a dark cavern and once as a creature,
- Contrary to traditional iconography, the “personified” Hell is depicted *en face* as compared to the usual practice of representing evil beings in profile,
- It is red as fire,
- It is portrayed as serene (accepting?),
- It has multiple eyes,
- The righteous are exiting it via an open mouth on top of its head (similar to the shape of the typical Leviathan of Hellmouths), even though it has a normal human mouth below its nose.



Figure 14. One of the marvels of India

Now, how do we know that this figure represents Hell? First, the righteous, in white clothing, are ascending from it and it holds a chain with which it has ensnared the Devil, an event spoken of in the canonical texts.<sup>18</sup> Second, Antonov and Mayzul’s have reproduced an image from a manuscript which shows a Hellmouth and it is actually labeled Адъ, that is, Hell.<sup>19</sup>

But what is the source of Hellhead? Clearly it is not the typical whale mouth in profile. Could it be the image of one of the 21 marvels of India (Figure 14)?<sup>20</sup>

16 Notice that in the second Yaroslavl and Vladimir-Suzdal icons the ‘trinity of the damned’ is the larger iconographic unit—Hellhead has the devil sitting on its lap, and the devil holds Judas on his lap.

17 2 Peter 2:4.

18 Revelation 20:2.

19 Antonov and Mayzul’s, op. cit. p.235.

20 Schedel’s *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493. For a concise survey of the history of early texts on monsters, and, therefore, a brief history of teratology see Wittkower, Rudolf, “Marvels of the East. A Study in the History of Monsters,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 5 (1942) pp. 159-197. For more recent studies see Mittman, Asa Simon and Peter J. Dendle, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Co., 2012.



Figure 15. A medieval image of Alexander encountering Blemmyes



Mythological headless creatures of this sort are called Blemmyes.<sup>21</sup> Mythical Blemmyes, however, occur in many western illustrated manuscripts including those of Herodotus and Pliny the Elder (1<sup>st</sup> century CE).<sup>22</sup> In particular they appear in illustrated manuscript copies of a popular Western and Eastern medieval fantastical novel about the life of Alexander the Great. For example, a medieval mss of this novel has the illustration shown in Figure 15.<sup>23</sup>

These illustrations are important to our argument because they occur in copies of this novel that were translated into Slavic, probably, firstly, in Serbian. This novel was written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by the so-called Pseudo-Callisthenes.<sup>24</sup> It was translated into many languages including Serbian, many manuscripts of which appeared from 1200 CE onward. The Serbian version of this novel is called *Српска Александрида*.<sup>25</sup> And, importantly, according to a list of holdings in the Kirillov-Belozerskiy monastery in Russia compiled by the monk Efrosin in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the monastery had a copy of this novel recorded as “Serpskaya Aleksandrida.”<sup>26</sup>

21 Blemmyes were an actual nomadic tribe that lived between the Nile and the Red Sea at the latitude of the First Cataract of the Nile. They are important to medieval history of Christianity in the Arabic peninsula because they often fought against the Romans and often attacked and killed Christian monks in that area. See Robert Timothy Updegraff *A Study of the Blemmyes* Brandeis University, PhD dissertation, 1978.

22 See Wittkower, op.cit.

23 From the British Library manuscript Harvey 4979 f72v. [http://picasaweb.google.com/lh/photo/Ds6JAM8XfBKZ3I\\_qaINUB1ucagw8raYNq8khWN9DlvM](http://picasaweb.google.com/lh/photo/Ds6JAM8XfBKZ3I_qaINUB1ucagw8raYNq8khWN9DlvM). For other representations of Blemmyes see also Mittman, Asa Simon, “Headless men and hungry monsters,” Stanford University Alumni Center: The Sarum Seminar, March, 2003. For an earlier study focusing on illustrations in the various Alexander novels see Ross, D.J.A. *Alexander Historiatus: A Guide to Medieval Illustrated Alexander Literature*. London: The Warburg Institute, 1963.

24 The real Callisthenes was Alexander the Great’s biographer who recorded his exploits throughout his campaigns.

25 Маринковић, Ралмила, *Српска Александрида*. Београд, 1969.

26 Ботвинник, М. Н., Я. С. Лурье и О. В. Творогов *Александрия--Роман об Александре Македонском по русской рукописи XV века*. Москва Наука 1966 [*Aleksandriya—Roman ob Aleksandre Makedonskom po russkoi rukopisi XV veka. The Alexandria—A novel of Alexander the Great according to a manuscript of the 15th c*. Moscow: Nauka, 1966.]



Figure 16. Headless men from an illustration in *Aleksandriya*


In this book Pseudo-Callisthenes records Alexander encountering many different fantastic creatures while on his conquests in the East. These include centaurs, amazons, humans with dog heads, other humans with six hands and six feet, some with only one foot, etc. And in the published mss *Aleksandriya*<sup>27</sup> there is an illustration of headless men from a 17<sup>th</sup> century copy of the book between pages 40 and 41 (Figure 14).

These are headless creatures with an opening on the top of their heads.<sup>28</sup> But their eyes, noses, and mouths are located on their chests like the Hell figure in our icons. Based on this representation of Hell as having a head from which the righteous rise from the mouth in the top of its head and the fact that representations of headless creatures similar to Hellhead existed in a much copied novel<sup>29</sup> known in Russia, we feel that it is this fanciful representation of Blemmyes in the Alexander novel that was the source for Hellhead.<sup>30</sup>

27 Botvinnik, et al., op. cit.

28 They could be crowns but the top of the crowns also look very much like teeth.

29 According to Marinkovich, op. cit. p. 337, more than 350 mss. of the *Aleksandriya* exist.

30  In the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, demonization of the tsar and Patriarch Nikon by Old Believers resulted in the two of them being represented as demons in folk art images. Whether any of the Hellheads pictured here are similar to representations of known political or religious figures of the period remains to be examined. Please note the partial similarity of this picture with the image of Hellhead in Figure 1. The relationship between the Old Believer art and Hellhead will be explored in future research.

## IMAGES OF THE INVISIBLE: ICONS AND ICONOCLASM IN JEAN-LUC MARION

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### Atheists and Iconoclasts

Before theists attempt to defend God against atheists, they would be wise to first take measure of themselves: *can* they talk even about God? To speak about something requires an understanding of it, but the optimistic theologian would do well to recall the famous warning of Augustine, “If you have been able to comprehend it, you have comprehended something other than God.”<sup>1</sup> To ignore this danger and to continue talking is only to expose our words and concepts as falling short of their target and merely referring back on ourselves.

If talking about God leads us into danger of idolatry, then, perhaps it is best to settle for silence. However, this position would lead to problems at least as dangerous as the first. Now both the atheist and the theologian go unanswered; the atheist’s questions receive no response and the theist does not have any idea what they believe in, and because of this the distinction between atheist and theist begins to break down. Both of them negate without distinction any positive statement made about God, and it is questionable how long the theist can hold out with a blind faith in an amorphous no-thing without falling into atheism himself.

The first case is pure idolatry, the second is pure negation. Is it possible to move beyond this impasse of overconfidence or despair, of purely univocal or purely equivocal language of God? If we hold Christian revelation to be true, we must be permitted to say *something*. In order to do this, first of all, we would need to recast our ideal of what it means to speak or have understanding about God. The underlying idea of both of the positions above required that speech be the perfect adequation of the words spoken and God’s essence; the only difference was that the negative theologian and atheist have already realized that this is impossible. In order to move forward, there must be a new way to understand the function of speech about God, a kind of analogous language or understanding that both refers to God and preserves the infinite distance that removes the divine from our understanding.

It was to overcome this impasse that contemporary scholar Jean-Luc Marion introduced first the concept of the icon to philosophy. He explains in *God Without Being* how the icon is a visible bridge of this theological paradox. The icon is a visible sign that depicts something for us to see, an image of Christ or the saints. And yet it does not claim to circumscribe what it points to, for it yet preserves the invisibility of God’s removal from us. By using this paradoxical nature of the religious image as a model for a philosophical

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1 Augustine, Sermon LII.16. (translation by SR)



concept, Marion develops a way of saying something real about God while yet leaving room for God to infinitely transcend our concepts of him. It is a compelling move for philosophy of religion, for it allows one to successfully fight the idolatry of overconfident positive theology as well as the iconoclasm of excessive negative theology or atheism.

Not everyone believes that Marion has succeeded in his project, however. Many readers fear Marion ultimately places God too far beyond human reach. Bruce Ellis Benson, for example, concludes that Marion essentially wants to suspend all language and knowledge about God, demanding either a full and immediate knowledge of God or nothing at all.<sup>2</sup> In other words, according to Benson's logic, Marion falls squarely into the realm of philosophical iconoclasm.

This objection is not one that is easily answered. Scholars have given extensive discussion to these issues from a philosophical perspective. Yet, few authors, including Benson, take into account Marion's writings on the icon's original sense as a holy image. In a lesser known work, *Crossing the Visible*, Marion affirms the important role of religious icons, even proclaiming them to be the cure for our image-saturated age.<sup>3</sup> To defend his position, he draws extensively from the key writings of the tradition that opposed the iconoclastic movement in the 8<sup>th</sup> century: the *Three Orations on the Defense of Holy Images* of John Damascene and the documents of the Second Council of Nicaea, which officially confirmed the importance of icon veneration in 787. If Marion is looking to key sources to affirm the value of the religious icon, this hardly sounds like the iconoclast Benson makes him out to be. A well-rounded philosophical critique of Marion's work would be remiss to accuse him of an "idolatry of transcendence"<sup>4</sup> without first accounting for how his positive stance on images fits in his larger philosophy of iconic words and ideas. Of course, we must first ask whether Marion is properly representing or simply misappropriating the traditional view. Two of these three tasks will be taken up in this paper. After first explaining Marion's interpretation of holy images, it will be compared more closely to those of John Damascene to analyze whether he is truly in line with the tradition. If John's writings mark Marion as an iconoclast even in his understanding of holy images, then Benson is right, and Marion's philosophical contributions must ultimately be rejected as the same extreme apophaticism that leads to atheism. If his writings properly defend religious icons, this makes possible the third task of defending Marion's icon at a philosophical level. The careful analysis demanded by this philosophical project exceeds our current limitations of time and space. Nevertheless, clarifying Marion's theological foundations and their relation to the tradition will provide an important step in this direction.

## Two Icons

While this paper is not primarily a philosophical critique, we might offer a brief word about Marion's stance as a phenomenologist. Phenomenology as a school of philosophy seeks to return to the things themselves through a careful, self-reflective examination of how they appear to us. The image-heavy word "icon," is far from superfluous for

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2 Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida & Marion on Modern Idolatry* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 222.

3 Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K.A. Smith (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 87.

4 Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, 223.

Marion's methodology, then, for sight is traditionally one of the most important ways that things appear to us. This phenomenological approach to God might at first evoke skepticism. How could the visible bring us to the ultimate invisible when metaphysics and abstract reasoning have failed? In fact, Marion wants to challenge precisely the notion that appearance yields only the visible, and he believes that icons are one of the best examples of this. To examine how this is possible, we will focus on Marion's more recent discussion of the icon as the face, and then use this to interpret Marion's theological work on religious icons.

*1. The Gaze of the Other.* The "idol," for Marion, was first and primarily used to describe a closed conception of God. Yet in his more recent work on the saturated phenomenon, Marion uses the term "idol" to describe a dazzling visual spectacle that commands the gaze to be still before it in admiration. This is not an evil in itself. A good painting ought to act as an idol, to awe and surprise us. Yet in order to dazzle, the painting must remain within the limitations of the subject's own vision and understanding. For this reason, Marion will claim that the idol is well suited for an art gallery, but unable to manifest the revelation of a God who challenges and transcends any human limitations.

In contrast, the icon is an appearance that does *not* submit to the subject; rather, it challenges the subject to submit to it on its own terms. Marion believes the human face offers one of the best examples of this phenomenon, and we can use this to describe how an icon works by highlighting three different characteristics.

First of all, the icon offers us the appearance of invisibility. This invisibility may not be always immediately evident to us. In an everyday sense one might ignore a passerby or interact with a sales clerk as a "visible" appearance, free of great mystery. At a careless glance, then, the face is banal. Yet, when I approach it through love, the phenomenon of the face appears in a different way.<sup>5</sup> Now the focus is not on the face, but on the eyes of the other, specifically the negative space that is the pupil. This invisibility is not simply a lack, but the origin of a counter-gaze that emerges from its unseen origin to regard me. This forms a second point of comparison; the painting escapes the rank of an ordinary object in its splendor, but it offers no gaze to meet and challenge the authority of mine. Before a face, I am being regarded.<sup>6</sup> Whereas in the idol I reigned unchallenged, simply shown the limits of my desires and thus a mirror image of myself, "coming before the icon empties the ego of its ability to control, to understand, to manipulate, to grasp. To come before the icon is to be overcome by the irreducible, inconceivable other who gazes upon me." The gaze of the other unseats me as a subject. I do not make demands of it, for it makes demands of me, silently commanding me to respect its personhood.<sup>7</sup>

This demand leads to the third aspect of the icon; I must change my response to it. As it is love that allows for my experience of the face to have invisibility, so the more I love, the more I encounter the invisibility that marks the personhood mediated by the visible face that appears.<sup>8</sup> For, of course, no matter how well I know someone, she will always surprise me, revealing that she is beyond the categories I make for her. Thus, here, invisibility is not the sign of a defect, but of an excess over my ability to know and

5 Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Steven Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 164.

6 Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Beraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 113.

7 Ibid., 116.

8 Ibid., 119.

perceive the given intuition with my limited concepts. For this reason, the unseen must always be preserved, for to make a face fully visible is to objectify it. The invisibility mediated by the visible face marks off the other's personhood.

Thus, we see in the iconic face the presence of three elements interacting with one another to yield the phenomenon of the icon: invisibility, counter-intentionality, and the change of my response. At first, the invisibility was hidden by banality, but after the introduction of the change of my response, this invisibility is the focus of attention, marking the counter-intentionality that shows the face as something to radically challenge the reign of my subjectivity. Once recognized, the counter-intentionality denies me as the ultimate subject ruling over the visible by its gaze, for it gazes at me and challenges me to love further. Although my choice to respond in love preceded my recognition of the face as a person, it is the counter-intentionality that makes this possible; if I loved my pencil, no such iconic experience could occur. Only after I make this initial choice do I experience that my love is following from the face's demands, even if the face was the one demanding this love all along.

2. *The Trace of the Holy*. Created in God's image, all faces are icons already, but religious icons are distinct because "they alone can keep and manifest a trace of the brilliance of the Holy."<sup>9</sup> These icons, including the holy images as well as the saints they depict, can be understood as religious not by a change of nature, but by the degree to which they mediate the holy. This is most perfectly shown in the person of Christ, "the perfect likeness [εἰκὼν] of the Father" (Colossians 1:15).

Material images, too, can mediate the holy. Unlike human beings, icons seem to bear their *imago Dei* (or *imago sancti* – image of the saint) on their facade rather than in the very fabric of their innermost, invisible being. But this external display is not where Marion locates the iconic property of a material image, as if one could determine how iconic the painting is by how accurately it portrays the saint's visage. If visual likeness were the criterion of the iconic, this would lead to a "mimetic rivalry" between the original and the image. The image would seek to rival or perfectly capture the original as its equal, even overshadow it, forcing a choice between *either* the original *or* the image. This is very similar to the total overconfident positive theology we saw in the beginning, which claimed total comprehension of the incomprehensible God. Clearly, such logic is more appropriate to an idol than an icon, which ought, instead, acknowledge an original that infinitely surpasses it.

It is important to note what follows from this claim. Once visual likeness is eliminated as a criterion for constituting the relationship between type and prototype, both similarity and dissimilarity are ruled out as a valid means of assessing the iconicity of a particular object. Clearly we must avoid defining iconicity by its similarity to its original, but if we demand that an image be *unlike* the original in appearance this would simply be an inversion of the same logic.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Marion is not arguing that icons must possess no visible resemblance whatsoever to their prototypes, but that visual similarity must not act as the primary principle of what makes an image iconic.

To find the properly iconic relationship between type and prototype, Marion turns to the text of the Second Council of Nicaea, which posits the Cross as the first and fundamental

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9 Ibid., 68.

10 Ibid., 71.



type, after Christ. Religious icons are therefore given the title “icon” by their similarity to the cross.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, Marion looks to the relationship between the Cross and Christ as the exemplary relationship between type and prototype. The Cross, as a type, indicates precisely the moment when the appearance of Christ is the furthest removed from his divine glory, and yet in doing so he is simultaneously manifesting the heights of glory.

Christ kills the image on the Cross, because he crosses an abyss without measure between his appearance and his glory. He definitively disqualifies the least pretension of an image to produce or even reproduce what it might of the glory of the original.<sup>12</sup>

The Cross is thus not marked for the visibility it offers, as in the case of the idol; it neither offers visibility for its invisible prototype, nor in some sense even for itself. If it were a horrific spectacle, it would be a powerful idol indeed, holding captive the gaze, but for most of the people of Judea, a crucifixion was simply a common occurrence they might overlook as they walked past, similar to the way one could overlook the face of a passerby. Based on the model of the Cross, where there is no longer priority on what is visible, the icon may now escape the mimetic rivalry that causes idol to overshadow its original. The icon lets the prototype surpass it entirely; and it is precisely this fact that allows it to reach the prototype where the idol failed. As Christ emptied himself of his humanity in his obedience to the point of death (Philippians 2:8), so the icon empties itself of visibility, “effaces itself to the point of transparency”; to do so is what makes it iconic.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the primary relationship between type and prototype Marion identifies as *kenosis*.<sup>14</sup>

If this relationship is to remain kenotic and thus iconic, the gap between the type and the prototype can never be closed; they must always be separated by an infinite distance. This is essential to Marion’s argument, for it ensures that the images and concepts used to refer to God always fall short, parallel to the classic doctrine of analogy. If it were otherwise, Marion would fall into the overconfident positive theology he condemns elsewhere. Thus, just as in the icon of the face, the distance of the seen and unseen may not be collapsed. Yet this does not mean that it is impossible to cross.

As we saw earlier, to see another as a person instead of an object required a choice on the part of the viewer, but this was made possible in the first place because there was counter-intentionality that originated from the unseen to cross the viewer’s gaze; thus it was not possible to have an iconic experience of a pencil like an iconic encounter with the face. In the same way, the gaze of the painted eyes alone could not make an iconic relation possible; it requires the gaze of the invisible prototype passing through the image. The Orthodox traditions of iconography are designed to reveal this truth, converging the perspective not at a point on the horizon of the painting, but within the heart of the viewer, tracing the path of the counter-gaze of the icon upon me.<sup>15</sup> Because this union between the type and the prototype does not occur naturally, like a human

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11 See for example, John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, trans. by David Anderson (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980), II.19; see also John’s statements following the commentary of the First Apology, p. 41.

12 Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 69.

13 Ibid, 78.

14 Ibid, 62.

15 Robyn Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-Logical Introduction* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 65.

face, it can only become iconic through a deeper principle at work. Marion draws this from the model of the greatest paradoxical unity, the person of Jesus who in his humanity could visibly be passed over like an ordinary man while invisibly being God himself. Thus, Marion calls the icon an “aesthetic parallel to the hypostatic union.”<sup>16</sup> Just as the hypostatic unity of natures in Christ elevates the human nature to the divine, so the intentional unity of an icon links the painted counter-gaze of the type to the heavenly counter-gaze of the prototype. It is the Holy Spirit who makes possible the bond of the visible and the invisible, just as he unites the Father and the Son: never collapsing the distance, but always crossing it “without movement and yet without respite.”<sup>17</sup>

It is possible to see through the banal appearance the trace of the invisibility of the prototype, but just as to see the counter-intentionality of the face required the choice to first love it as a person, so to see the gaze of the prototype through the icon requires the viewer to change her perspective, the third element we emphasized in the phenomenon of the face. Just as a special grace of the Spirit was required to make present the counter-intentionality of the icon, a special grace of the Spirit is needed for the viewer to see it in the right way. Thus, according to Marion, the new hermeneutic of vision required to see the true glory in this kenotic appearance requires not just love, but prayerful veneration:

[T]he icon can be contemplated with honor only by a gaze that venerates it as the stigmata of the invisible. Only the one who prays can thus climb from the visible to the invisible (according to the logic of the type), whereas the spectator can only compare the visible to the visible (according to the logic of the mimetic). To the saints these things are holy: only the one who prays crosses the icon, because he alone knows the function of the type.<sup>18</sup>

The icon empties itself to become the meeting place between the gaze of the holy one and the gaze of the one at prayer, united in the love of the Spirit. Through prayerful encounter with the gaze of the holy one mediated through the icon, we are challenged to grow still deeper in love, and to imitate this kenotic act of the icon to become an ever more perfect trace of the Father.

Religious icons therefore show once again the interplay of these three primary elements: invisibility, counter-intentionality, and change in response. They interact in much the same ways as the icon of the face. Here, however, the Holy Spirit plays a critical role, both linking the counter-intentionality of the prototype to the type, and allowing the viewer to recognize this counter-gaze. The invisibility present in the visible is first overlooked as a banal phenomenon, but once the viewer decides to change her attitude to prayerful veneration, she becomes aware of the counter-intentionality of the prototype mediated by the type. This further demands a change in the viewer’s response, and a greater recognition of the insufficiency of the painted image to capture or objectify the whole of the prototype.

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16 Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 84.

17 Ibid., 84

18 Ibid., 75.

## Negativity and Iconoclasm

Robyn Horner insists that Marion's theology essentially falls within the tradition of the Second Council of Nicaea and John Damascene.<sup>19</sup> Both essentially agree that the icon, is "a likeness, or a model, or a figure of something, showing in itself what it depicts,"<sup>20</sup> and that "all images reveal and make perceptible those things which are hidden."<sup>21</sup> Especially in light of Benson's critique of Marion as an iconoclast, however, a deeper unity is not so immediately obvious. Let us turn to weigh Marion's claims against the view of icons given by John Damascene to examine whether Marion can truly claim to be an iconodule.

*1. Participation and Kenosis.* Both Marion and John Damascene acknowledge Christ as the true icon, the perfect "image (εἰκὼν) of the invisible God" (Colossians. 1:15). But next to Christ, Marion makes the cross his definitive icon, where John Damascene does not give one type of image as superior. This point is minor in itself, especially considering that Marion has lifted the definition from the text of the Second Council of Nicaea. Nevertheless, it bears importance as Marion's justification for a second area of difference, that kenosis is the essential relation of type and prototype, rooting icons in the stark light of the Crucifixion. It is this "self-emptying" or "self-effacing" nature of Marion's theology of icons that sounds closest to iconoclasm.

John Damascene does not explicitly draw out what kind of relationship the type has to the prototype. It is not a similarity in matter, for it makes no difference if a cross is made of gold, wood, or iron.<sup>22</sup> Nor is it based on similarity in visual form, for the Cross is venerated as a type of Christ (and the burning bush as a type of Mary), despite their obvious visual differences from the persons they represent.<sup>23</sup> This would at least rule out the mimetic relationship also rejected by Marion: it is not visual similarity that constitutes the likeness of the type and prototype.

But if it is not matter and not visual similarity, what links the icon to what it represents? Christoph von Schönborn holds that the most we can infer from John's writings is that the relationship of the type to the prototype is most properly defined by participation; the more the image participates in the original, the more its likeness.<sup>24</sup> John defines this position more clearly in his more systematic writings. As he explains in *On the Orthodox Faith*, there are indeed different kinds of participation corresponding to the level of being of the thing in question. All creation participates in God's goodness through its being, but living things participate by both being and living. Human beings participate in being and living but most of all through their rationality, a faculty which makes them even more like God. Nevertheless, to participate rationally is only possible through a free choice to persevere in the good.<sup>25</sup> If one chooses not to persevere one falls into sin. Those who

19 Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-Logical Introduction*, 63.

20 *On the Divine Images*, III.16. "Εἰκὼν μὲν οὖν ἐστὶν ὁμοίωμα, καὶ παράδειγμα, καὶ ἐκτύπωμά τινος, ἐν ἑαυτῷ δεικνύον τὸ εἰκονιζόμενον." *Patrologiae Graecae* (PG), vol. 94, 1337b.

21 *Ibid.*, III.17, "Πᾶρα εἰκὼν ἐκφαντορικὴ τοῦ κρυφίου ἐστὶ καὶ δεικτική." PG, vol. 94, 1336b.

22 *Ibid.*, II.19.

23 *Ibid.*, II.20.

24 Christoph von Schönborn, *God's Human Face: The Christ-Icon*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 194.

25 John Damascene, "On the Orthodox Faith," in *Writings*, trans. by Frederic H. Chase, Jr. (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), IV.13.



persevere the most, however, and thus participate the most, are the saints. John says in *On the Divine Images* that the saints have become:

likenesses of God as far as possible, since they have chosen to cooperate with divine election. Therefore God dwells in them. They are truly called gods, not by nature, but by adoption, just as red-hot iron is called fiery, not by its nature, but because it participates in the action of the fire.<sup>26</sup>

In *On the Orthodox Faith*, John calls them “gods” or “kings,”

not by nature, but because they have ruled over and dominated sufferings, and because they have kept undebased the likeness of the divine image to which they were made—for the image of the king is also called a king, and, finally, because they have been freely united with God and receiving Him as a dweller within themselves have through association with Him become by grace what He is by nature.<sup>27</sup>

Through these similar passages, we see that the participation of human beings involves free cooperation in both an active element—overcoming sufferings—and a passive element—keeping their true nature as the image of God pure. The end result of this cooperation is the union with the Divine nature through grace. It follows that if the greatest act of God’s salvation in Christ is completed on the Cross, then the fullest imitation of creatures is to participate in this kenosis. If John links the type to its prototype by participation, and the participation of human beings is to act like the loving God who emptied himself for our salvation, then this is very much in line with Marion’s identification of the icon as kenotic.

The greater difficulty, however, is to show how physical images can participate by kenosis. Icons are not made in the image of God in the same way that the saints are, nor are they able to freely cooperate in God’s Divine plan. Nevertheless, just as saints are ultimately only able to become iconic through the free gift of Divine grace, not through their natural abilities alone, so icons are also holy because of the initiative of God’s grace. According to Ambrosios Giakalis, an icon is thus considered holy not because of what it is by itself, but only “in so far as it preserves its integrity” as “vehicle and stable channel of divine grace.”<sup>28</sup> The icon must be an “open road.”<sup>29</sup> What would it mean for an icon to be a channel or an open road? A road, first of all, cannot be a dead end. Thus, an icon could not be anything that would stop the gaze on its own image, like the idol. A road is always a means to an end, and the road that is the most “open” is one that has the least emphasis on itself as a road, but rather transports its travelers to its primary destination; thus the icon must transport the believer to the presence of the holy one, and the presence of the holy one to the viewer. In other words, an image can only become an

26 *On the Divine Images*, III.33. “Οὗτοι δὲ εἰσιν οἱ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν ὁμοιωθέντες Θεῷ, ἐκ τε τῆς ἑαυτῶν προαιρέσεως, καὶ τῆς Θεοῦ ἐνοικήσεως, καὶ συνεργίας· οἵτινες καὶ Θεοὶ λέγονται ἀληθῶς, οὐ φύσει, ἀλλὰ θέσει· ὡς πῦρ λέγεται ὁ πεπυρακτωμένος σίδηρος, οὐ φύσει, ἀλλὰ θέσει, καὶ μεθέξει πύρος.” PG, vol. 94, 1352a-b.

27 “On the Orthodox Faith,” IV.15. “Θεοὺς δὲ λέγω, καὶ βασιλεῖς, καὶ κύριους, οὐ φύσει, ἀλλ’ ὡς τῶν παθῶν βασιλεύσαντας καὶ κυριεύσαντας, καὶ τὴν τῆς θείας εἰκόνας ὁμώωσιν, καθ’ ἣν καὶ γεγένηται, ἀπαραχάρακτον φυλάξαντας· βασιλεὺς γὰρ λέγεται, καὶ ἡ τοῦ βασιλέως εἰκὼν· καὶ ὡς ἐνωθέντας Θεῷ κατὰ προαίρεσιν, καὶ τοῦτον δεξαμένους ἔνοικον, καὶ τῇ τούτου μεθέξει γεγονότας χάριτι, ὅπερ αὐτός ἐστι φύσει.” PG, vol. 94, 1164b.

28 Ambrosios Giakalis, *Images of the Divine: The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council*. (New York: E.J. Brill, 1994), 121.

29 Ibid.

open channel if it is a kenotic image, referring beyond itself and thus emptying into its final destination. Thus, if Marion claims the relationship between type and prototype is founded on kenosis, John Damascene would have no serious objections, either for the saints or the images that depict them.

Of course, John does not explicitly say any of this. His primary concern is to defend the veneration of icons, not to give a philosophical analysis of what they are. Yet, Marion's kenotic principle is not only in harmony with John Damascene's writings, but it would even solidify his position. John unites his broader category of icons, which includes both human beings and painted images, by the common action of revealing the hidden. Adding a kenotic principle would further reinforce by *how* they do so. Kenosis would lend the theology of icons a cohesion with the rest of Christian life that a strong focus on something like visual similarity lacks, for as in Marion's thought, icons reflect the self-giving charity to which everyone is called. This would allow icons to inspire desire and imitation of the good in a more intrinsic way than John Damascene supposed, again, not merely in what it presents, but in the very mode of its presenting, inspiring the believer to deny herself as the center of attention to refer all glory back to its source in God. In other words, the icon is not only said to participate in its prototype because the Holy Spirit acts through it, but because it shares in the same activity as its prototype: kenosis.

There still remains a critical difficulty in Marion's thought, and one not shared by John Damascene, and so we are left to defend Marion on his own terms. Namely, an icon must empty itself—kenosis is by definition a subtraction from the original. Without a properly positive principle to counter this, one could interpret it as leading to self-destruction. Marion does indeed say that an icon must “efface itself to the point of transparency.”<sup>30</sup> Although Benson does not seem to be well acquainted with *The Crossing of the Visible* himself, he finds this phrase alarming enough to quote it through another author. He argues that an icon saved from its own visibility is self-negating; for it to be an image requires first of all that it appear.<sup>31</sup> According to Benson's critique, this self-effacing kenotic principle demands the destruction of the image to protect it from idolatry. If we take Benson's critique concretely, he believes Marion's logic requires us to replace all images of saints with single-hued color fields or whitewashed walls.

Such an interpretation is not consistent with Marion's text, especially when the isolated phrase Benson quotes is placed within the whole. First of all, if kenosis of an image for Marion is based on the model of Christ, then in principle it must not imply destruction. Recall:

it is precisely at the moment that he loses his human appearance [*figure*] that Christ becomes the figure of the divine will: in him, it is no longer his human appearance [*figure*] that is imagined [*sa figure*]; and shedding appearance, he gives shape [*donne figure*] to a holiness that would have remained invisible without the shrine [*écrin*] (not screen [*écran*]) of his body.<sup>32</sup>

Just as Christ's obedience unto death is also the reason for his greatest glory, so the saints in dying by their self-giving love are raised to a new life in which they partake of

30 Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, 78.

31 Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, 222.

32 Marion, *The Crossing the Visible*, 61.

Divine nature. In neither case does the “self-effacement” destroy the type or collapse it into the prototype. This principle must also hold for images; in offering up their place as spectacle to yield the glory to the original, the icon should not be erased but enhanced. Of course, for saints, this kenosis is never according to hatred or self-effacement, but self-giving love which is in itself already a sharing in Divine nature. The more saints love, the more they become who human beings are meant to be—one with Divine nature.

Once again, to defend the positive value of a painted image must take on a different character than the saints, for the principle of kenosis as free self-gift does not easily translate to an image without a will. Yet, it certainly does not mean destruction of the icon or its removal. The meaning of an image’s kenotic “effacing” becomes clearer in the context of more moderate statements Marion makes elsewhere, for example:

the visible surface must, paradoxically, efface itself, or at least efface within it every opacity that would obfuscate the crossing of gazes [*la cruise des regards*]: the icon *dulls* the image in it, in order to prevent any self-sufficiency, autonomy, or self-affirmation.<sup>33</sup>

The icon is thus dulled, not prohibited from appearing, at any level, as Benson’s interpretation of “transparency” suggests. This is still very abstract, and Marion himself acknowledges the need to translate this theological principle of kenosis into an aesthetic one. While he appreciates the Byzantine icons of the Orthodox Church, he certainly does not think that icons are limited to this. Although most of his writings favor modern minimalist art as examples of images that preserve invisibility, in *The Crossing of the Visible*, Marion does also observe that many other traditions in Christian art operate by very kenotic principles; the interplay of light in Gothic domes as well as the shadows of Rembrandt and Caravaggio are attempts to mediate the mystery of the unseen, not merely present the visible.<sup>34</sup> Recall that Marion does not object to art that bears visual similarity to the prototype, providing it does not try to surpass its original, but simply to using similarity—or dissimilarity—as a standard to judge the iconicity of an image. Whatever its style, all iconic art is united not by mimesis but by this common principle: “the prestige of the visible object impoverishes itself [*s’appauvrit*].”<sup>35</sup> Marion’s aesthetic guide remains a rough outline, but it is clear at least from his examples that he does not think it is possible to exclude representational images from the role of icon.

In fact, far from warranting the elimination of religious images, Marion’s stance actually makes any iconoclasm illegitimate. According to Marion’s definition of iconicity, it is not up to the icon alone whether it reaches the invisible. Certainly, the icon has a part in this process by emptying itself of spectacle, but a painted gaze on its own still shares the rank of my pencil; it needs the counter-intentionality of the holy one depicted in order to be iconic, just as the counter-intentionality of the face was needed to make possible my recognition of its invisibility and my unseating as the subject. This counter-intentionality does not just happen on its own; as Marion concluded from his brief foray into Trinitarian theology, it is ultimately the initiative of the Holy Spirit that makes possible this connection of the type to prototype, and it is then the one praying who is able to see it as such. If we want to call an image and idol, then, it is not enough to rule out the image on its own terms. We must also rule out the possibility that the Holy Spirit

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33 Ibid., 60-1.

34 Ibid., 63.

35 Ibid., 62.



can act through it and the viewer can venerate the holy through it. On what grounds could one make such a claim? I might argue an image is “too visible” or idolatrous for me to use, but I cannot make the claim that it could never be iconic, especially if another person or group find worship through it to be fruitful. Thus, iconoclasm is simply not a defensible interpretation of Marion’s kenotic principle, since the role of an image as icon rests also on the action of the Holy Spirit and the one at prayer.

To sum up, Marion’s kenotic identification of type and prototype is not identical to John Damascene’s position, since he left this idea undeveloped, the two views can be brought into harmony with each other. This in itself is not enough to defend Marion against a “self-negating” interpretation of his kenosis, but a closer look at his thought reveals that iconoclasm is inconsistent with his thought. Because counter-intentionality and the response of the viewer is a critical dimension of the icon, the iconicity—or idolatry—of an image depends on more than the appearing alone.

2. *Revealing or Keeping Hidden.* The second key area of disagreement between John Damascene and Marion is their respective emphasis on the positive value and negative limitations of icons as a way to know of invisible things. Some of the differences between these authors on this issue are no doubt related to their audiences. John is addressing iconoclasts, and thus stresses the positive quality of images, while Marion is speaking primarily against the temptation of idolatry, and thus must stress their transcendence from the human mind. Nevertheless, John puts a strong emphasis on the teaching value of corporeal images:

Anyone would say that our inability immediately to direct our thoughts to contemplation of higher things makes it necessary that familiar everyday media be utilized to give suitable form to what is formless, and make visible what cannot be depicted, so that we are able to construct understandable analogies.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to this, Marion does not focus on the teaching ability of images. Although Marion is often more abstract than we might prefer, true to his method as a phenomenologist he starts with what appears. He departs from John in two places. First, he does not think that the visible in itself can lead to an iconic understanding, for it is already too satisfied with the intentions it possesses in itself. The visible in itself is unable to perform the reversal of the subject’s priority necessary to an icon. Second, Marion places less faith in the faculty of reason, for the counter-intentionality is not only invisible to reason, but its very invisibility is concealed as banality, a veil which even a closely rational scrutiny will not pierce. It is only in the choice to love that the experience of the iconic becomes possible.

Marion’s refusal to make reason the ultimate criterion of vision is not to surrender to irrationality; rather, it is to acknowledge that the excess of evidence is too much for reason to bear.<sup>37</sup> This is true of the face, and especially true of God, who so exceeds in evidence that our intellects are blinded, even to the extent that we overlook that there is even something to see. This means that the initial decision to believe is far from obvious,

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36 Ibid., I.11. “Ὅτι μὲν γὰρ εἰκότως προβέβληνται τῶν ἀτυπώτων οἱ τύποι, καὶ τὰ σχήματα τῶν ἀσχηματίστων, οὐ μόνον αἰτίαν φαίη τις εἶναι τὴν καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἀναλογίαν, ἀδυνατοῦσαν ἀμέσως ἐπὶ τὰς νοητὰς ἀνατείνεσθαι θεωρίας, καὶ δεομένην οἰκείων καὶ συμφυῶν ἀναγωγῶν.” PG, vol. 94, 1241a-b.

37 Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, 59.

and if it did not radically exceed one's expectations, it would once again fall back to confirm the limits of reason's subjectivity. The will alone, the faculty which loves,<sup>38</sup> can pass beyond this poverty of appearance which renders the intellect powerless.

[I]n knowing God by the loving act of the will, man imitates God in his highest name, and becomes, by the grace of love, himself God. God is approached only by he who jettisons all that does not befit love; God, who gives himself as Love only through love, can be reached only so long as one receives him by love, and to receive him by love becomes possible only for he who gives himself to him. Surrendering oneself to love, not surrendering oneself to evidence.<sup>39</sup>

Only through this choice to love is the gaze able to bear any evidence. "Only love, 'which bears all' (1 Corinthians 13:7) can bear with its gaze Love's excess," and the more the love, the less it will turn away, blinded to this "bedazzlement" of Love's evidence.<sup>40</sup> This is true most of all in accepting the truths of Revelation, but it is also true in the icon of the face. Only if she decides to empty herself of her need to let her intentions dominate her intuitions, only if she decides instead to love, can a subject allow the other enough distance to appear in his unique otherness and counter-intentionality.<sup>41</sup>

Marion believes that this is precisely the meaning of "knowing the charity of Christ which surpasses all knowledge," (Ephesians 3:19): not that we renounce knowledge, but that we yield to a knowledge that surpasses the limits of ordinary philosophy—"To know following love, and to know what love itself reveals."<sup>42</sup> Thus, Marion's ultimate motive in his emphasis on the unknown is not to undermine the importance of images as a valid way to understand the world, but merely to preserve these icons from a philosophy uninformed by love.

If this is the case, John Damascene's views would not fall so far from Marion's as it first seemed. John's concern throughout his treatises is not primarily the technical philosophical relations between the type and prototype, but the basic relationship between the believers and holy image. Namely, the icon is not there to be thought or pondered, but venerated, and to defend this obligation is John's primary goal. John frequently insists that icons are a powerful aid to those who come to them already with a disposition of prayer and love. When John suggests that icons are understood with reason, it is therefore only a reason already based on the truths of Revelation, starting first with the truth of the Incarnation. He is much more explicit on these views on *De Orthodoxa Fide*, where he states clearly that God can only be pursued by faith, not rational inquiry, "for the more he is sought out, the more he is unknown, the more he is investigated, the more he is hidden." For this reason, he advises the faithful to

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38 Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, 59. Marion draws heavily from Pascal in this chapter, and here cites the origin of this idea as *Pensées* §82/L. 44. See also Marion's *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 125-7.

39 Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, 61.

40 Ibid., 67.

41 Ibid., 166-7.

42 Marion, *In Excess*, 169.

“adore God with a mind that is not overcurious.”<sup>43</sup> John believes that concepts and metaphors, along with visible icons, can help reason reach some understanding of the mysteries of God, but only as informed by faith.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the optimism in reason that John Damascene shows by using relatively few qualifications to speak of God in *On the Divine Images* is in a context of analogous language addressed to the faithful. We cannot grasp or encompass God. Nevertheless, in supporting a knowledge that does not aim at total comprehension, images help us to keep in mind the truth of salvation. Ultimately, however, the role of the icon is to help us to desire and imitate the good, not simply teaching us facts but also inspiring us to holy deeds.<sup>45</sup>

Even if the difference is smaller than it originally appeared, it is not entirely overcome; Marion still does not allow icons a teaching function other than to model the form of Christian life. Yet, perhaps the need for caution that Marion shows does not reveal a desire to ignore corporeal things, but his use of a methodology that relies so heavily on phenomena. While it is true that both the methodology of phenomenology and John Damascene place the beginning of knowledge in the senses, and give priority to vision, phenomenology rests on sense experience to a much greater degree. There are no convenient *a priori* principles or appeals to a spiritual realm to fall back upon. *All* knowledge starts from experience, and thus if we are to have knowledge of the invisible, it must start from the appearance itself. If the appearances did not empty themselves to show that they are insufficient, phenomenology would be forced to negate itself by becoming iconoclastic metaphysics or sink into idolatrous nihilism—the former stating that the appearance is not the real and the latter stating the image is everything, and our own limitations define the extent of the world. For John, what is seen reveals the invisible. For Marion, what is not seen reveals—and must reveal—the invisible.

There is much more to discuss concerning Marion’s phenomenological commitments. But this must be reserved as a further step of research. The discussion here was not a philosophical critique but a theological one, to determine whether Marion’s writings on the religious icon were consistent with the Christian tradition. Although Marion’s abstract approach can undermine the positive applications of his ideas, his ideas still find harmony with the views of John Damascene. We found some strain between the two traditions in the way that the type is linked to the prototype as well as the teaching value of the images, but both of these differences were reconcilable. Further philosophical critiques ought to keep in mind the faithfulness of this theological formulation before so easily forming an accusation of iconoclasm. Marion’s caution against visibility is in this case not iconoclasm, but a vigilant concern to protect the order of love from the objectifying of rationality that submits everything to the idolatry of the subject’s understanding, allowing instead a space for the other to take initiative in the radically de-centered realm of charity.

43 John Damascene, “Against Heresies,” in *Writings*, 162. “ὅσα γὰρ ἐρανᾶται, τοσοῦτ᾽ πλέον ἀγνοεῖται, καὶ ὅσα πολυπραγμονεῖται, ἐπιπλίον κρύπτεται. Ἀπεριέργῳ τοίνυν λόγῳ προσκυνεῖσθω θεὸς ὑπὸ τῶν πιστῶν.” PG, vol. 94, 779a.

44 John Damascene, “On the Orthodox Faith,” IV.11.

45 Ibid., III.17, II.6.



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# JOHN CLIMACUS' LADDER, RUSSIAN SPIRITUALITY AND MONASTIC REVIVAL(S): CONTEXTUALIZING THE LANKTON CODEx

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## Introduction

In 2011, in order to complement its holdings of three icons of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton, MA acquired a 19<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of John Climacus' 7<sup>th</sup> century book of spiritual practice on which the icon is based, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, in the form of 311 folia in Church Slavonic, named the *Lankton Codex*<sup>2</sup> in honor of the Museum's founder Gordon Lankton. This book is a black leather-bound manuscript with two spade-shaped brass clasps, foliate designs on the front and spine, and a large St. Andrew's cross on the back. The manuscript is copied from a 1647 edition, containing similar but somewhat more crude headpieces, decorations and *The Ladder* icon itself (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> The folia are approximately 4.5" x 6.5" and have no watermarks. The text is written in black ink with red section headings, a common feature of Church Slavonic manuscripts. Analysis of the script thus far suggests the presence of at least two scribes. The first section, which does not appear in the 1647 edition from which this manuscript was copied<sup>4</sup> but contains a traditional preface, is written in a newer script than the rest. The semiuncial script of this first section, which introduces the manuscript and its contents—the body of Climacus' text as well as a number of other shorter texts traditionally included with *The Ladder*—is smaller than the script that begins on 6 recto, and suggests that perhaps this first section was inserted at a later time. East Slavic recension is uniform throughout. The section that begins on 6 recto generally appears to have a slightly older style, perhaps more imitative of the original, with a larger, more elaborate and more regular uncial script. Lastly, the marginalia throughout the manuscript suggest at least one additional hand, likely a reader at a later time.

The goal of this paper is to contextualize this manuscript within the history of *The Ladder* in Russian monasticism both on its own terms, by tracing the genealogy of John's presentation of desert contemplative practice in monastic Russian texts, and more

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2 In paleography, a codex is a term to refer to a hand-written, bound book.

3 The initial paleographic analysis of this codex was conducted by Dr. Raoul N. Smith of the Museum of Russian Icons. See "The Ladder of Divine Ascent – A Codex and an Icon", available on the Museum's website.

4 A microfilm copy of the 1647 version of the Slavonic *Ladder* was consulted at the Lamont Library at Harvard University.



Figure 1. Ladder of Divine Ascent, *Lankton Codex*, f15v.

in which this text has been disseminated, introduces us to John Climacus' treatise—a manual for spiritual perfection for monks, whose original intent was far more modest than its eventual effect on the development of Eastern Christianity.

In the context of the manuscript at hand, the image also provides us with an apt visual metaphor for what its existence represents in the spiritual landscape of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, when it was (in 1837) copied by a monk named Joseph in an unknown monastery and for unknown purposes besides the obvious need, for one reason or another, to reproduce this classic.

5 See Figure 1.

broadly, by tracing the influence of what is loosely referred to as “Sinaite spirituality.” The aim is to demonstrate the historical importance, both for Russian monasticism and for Russian spirituality more broadly, of the appearance of a manuscript of the 7<sup>th</sup>-century *The Ladder* in 1837, and to analyze this appearance both within the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century monastic revival and within the context of historical Russian Orthodoxy.

Between the introductory texts and the body of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* in the *Lankton Codex*, one finds a somewhat crudely rendered representation of *The Ladder* icon.<sup>5</sup> This icon became, in the centuries following the dissemination of John Climacus' text throughout the Orthodox East, an eminently recognizable image integral to the perception of Orthodox Christian spiritual life both in the monastic and the lay context. In the icon, John Climacus (b. circa 570) stands at the bottom holding a scroll presumably containing the text of *The Ladder*, emerging from a church and standing on the top step, on his right a group of monks stretching back as far as the eye can see, on his left the eponymous ladder. While at the bottom a monk follows the direction of John's extended index finger and begins to ascend the ladder, closer to the top other monks struggle with the demons who attempt, and often succeed, in pulling them off, plunging them into a fiery pit. But the monk who has ascended to the very top of the ladder is greeted by angels and Christ Himself. With this striking visual representation of spiritual warfare, this manuscript, as many others



For despite the somewhat misleading fiery pit featured in this particular icon, which suggest a finality to falling off—i.e., to experiencing a setback in one's spiritual progress—the ladder is in fact understood both by John Climacus and by subsequent theologians and practitioners to represent less of a linear progression from absolute sin to absolute virtue than a cyclical process wherein one is constantly falling and rising, repeating the lower steps even as one has advanced to the higher rungs. Spiritual failings are to be just as expected as victories.

### Summary

In 1837, Russian monasticism was in the midst of a revival—yet in a sense it was also in the midst of repeating its own history, marked to this day by a continuous string of suppressions and revivals, of cultural centrality and cultural irrelevance, of constant reinvention within the confines of zealously guarded and ostensibly timeless tradition. As will be explained, the idealization and veneration of monks and monasteries as heavenly places on earth coexisted with suspicion of contemplative practices and ever-increasing efforts to bring potentially disruptive aspects of monasticism in line with official structures of Church authority; at the same time, the de-emphasis and suppression of monasticism by ecclesiastical and political authority in the early modern period made way for revival by ensuring only the most sincere postulants. The spread of interest in monastic practices such as eldership among the laity and the rich intellectual exchange between certain monasteries (most prominently Optina Pustyn) and 19<sup>th</sup> century authors and religious philosophers flourished alongside an association of eldership with hereticism and sectarianism on the one hand and widespread secularization on the other. In this way the individualized self-perfecting practice of contemplative monasticism is simultaneously emblematic of the struggle of the institution and practice itself, not only for survival and relevance but, ultimately, for glory; i.e., for the continual viability of the monastery as the locus of Christian life.

Thus, finally, in terms of this analysis, the icon also provides a visualization of the self-perception of Russian monasticism and the traditionalist framework in which its revivals were understood by their leaders and disciples. The image of generations of monks attempting to follow an unchanging, narrow path to Christ set forth by the early Church Fathers and finding themselves periodically knocked off course by the conditions surrounding the role of monasticism in the larger Church is central to the proclaimed task of recovery and restoration—of sources, of practices—that informs each generation of “revivalists.”

### Late Antiquity

As John Chryssaugis observed in his monograph on John Climacus, the latter and his 7<sup>th</sup> century contemporaries had the sense that they were living “at the end of an epoch” and felt a responsibility to preserve the texts and practices of the early Church, most especially the Fathers, but also, as we observe on John's part in *The Ladder*, to systematize the teachings. With his particular attention to the “psychological life of the inner being” and, more broadly speaking, to the individual's progress towards deification, John Climacus provides a crucial bridge between the sacralized texts of the Fathers, primarily oriented towards Trinitarian and Christological doctrine, and the Christian journey of the postulant as an individual striving to fulfill the promise of Christ while engaged in a struggle with

his own imperfection.<sup>6</sup> At the center of *The Ladder* is prayer, which constitutes both the path and the goal, continual communion with God being the highest form of prayer. In Step 28, “On Prayer,” John characterizes prayer as “a dialogue and union of man with God,” a practice that “achieves a reconciliation with God.”<sup>7</sup> Through a system of renunciation and self-cultivation, John Climacus formulates a pathway to becoming what Evagrius Ponticus (345-399), a foundational figure in the Eastern Orthodox approach to prayer and its first “codifier,” called a theologian: one who “prays in truth.”<sup>8</sup> The attainment of a practice of prayer at this level allows the monk, like an angel, to pray for the purification of mankind.

While specific citations are rare, John, according to convention and reflective of the self-perception of 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century desert monasticism, is clear throughout *The Ladder* about his dependence on the Fathers, the “true servants” of God, referring in Step 1 even to the pen and paper as representations of their legacy:

So, then, with unquestioning obedience let us reach out our untrustworthy hand to the true servants of God, to those who devoutly urge us on and in faith compel us by their commands. Let us make a treatise, with their knowledge as the implement of writing, a pen dipped in their subdued yet glorious humility, applied to the smooth white parchments of their hearts, or rather resting on the tablets of the spirit. Let us write on it divine words, or rather seeds, and let us begin like this.<sup>9</sup>

In combination with general references to and stories about the Fathers,<sup>10</sup> John mentions matters of textual monastic formation which they defined, specifically ethical concepts and catalogues of virtues and vices. John marks his allegiance to them, both granting his own work legitimacy and re-inscribing the vitality of their early work for the continuation of monasticism.<sup>11</sup> He also inscribes himself into the textual Christian tradition more broadly, drawing on Biblical and authoritative ascetic texts.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, as Johnsen has demonstrated in detail in *Reading John Climacus*, by utilizing stories and quotations from the Fathers to illustrate his own teaching, John also provides a new interpretation of the material.<sup>13</sup> He is concerned not only to pass down the wisdom of the Fathers but also to set forth, from his own understanding, a framework for a living practice. In this way key components of monastic practice according to the Fathers, such

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6 John Chryssaugis, *John Climacus: From the Egyptian Desert to the Sinaite Mountain* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 11.

7 Climacus, 274.

8 Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 111.

9 Climacus, 74-5.

10 Of the Fathers who had the greatest influence on John Climacus, Gregory Nazianzus (329-79) is specifically mentioned as well as referenced in *The Ladder*. Chryssaugis also traces the influence of Gregory of Nyssa (330-395) in John’s treatment of “the human person, the passions, dispassion and salvation, the vision of God, deification, death, as well as the relationship between body and soul,” 34.

11 Henrik Rydell Johnsen, *Reading John Climacus: Rhetorical Argumentation, Literary Convention and the Tradition of Monastic Formation* (Lund: Lund University, 2007), 200.

12 Ibid.

13 Johnsen, 204.

as unceasing prayer,<sup>14</sup> self-consciously become a part of a system of bodily and spiritual practice both rigorous and empathetic to the human struggle against the desires of the fallen flesh. At its root are the convictions that the human being naturally seeks God and that transfiguration and, ultimately, deification are a tangible possibility.

Although *The Ladder* was written for the instruction of monks and dealt with the particular issues pertinent to such an existence<sup>15</sup>, John's treatise, much more than simply a monastic rule, proved to have wide appeal in Eastern (and, eventually, Western<sup>16</sup>) Christianity due to its concern for guiding the individual through the difficult path of self-transformation from renunciation of the world to divine communion and its empathy towards constant struggle as well as its ultimate optimism in the possibility, for one of great faith, of attaining the heights of spiritual maturity and transcending the baser aspects of the self. The text also avoids prescriptivism regarding individual paths of renunciation, such as fasting and the details of the mortification of the flesh, focusing instead on the "vital content" of monasticism: unceasing communion with God.<sup>17</sup> John even addresses the topic of salvation outside the monastery, being careful to reassure the reader that while the highest spiritual feats are indeed the special gifts of monks, living in the world must not be considered an absolute obstacle to spiritual development. Yet despite this concession, John affirms that there are gifts associated with the monastic life which are not open to the laity, as in Step 2, "On Detachment":

Who in the outside world has worked wonders, raised the dead, expelled demons? No one. Such deeds are done by monks. It is their reward. People in secular life cannot do these things, for, if they could, what then would be the point of ascetic practice and the solitary life?<sup>18</sup>

The fact that John returns to this question of access to the divine several times throughout the text, albeit briefly and sometimes perfunctorily, highlights his awareness that a tension of valuation exists between the two Christian paths (marriage and celibacy) and that a perceived need to avoid alienating Christians living "in the world" must be addressed even in a monastic treatise. In the context of monastic life itself, attention to this question might be attributed to the cultivation of humility; i.e., to the need of the monk to avoid a sense of spiritual superiority vis-a-vis the lay Christian even if he attains the aforementioned gifts. At the same time, as we see in the quotation above, it is just as much a warning to lay Christians who may seek self-perfection that the charisms of the ascetic life cannot be achieved without its sacrifices. Nevertheless, John is careful, both here and throughout the text, to present the monk as a vessel, whose reception of

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14 John's writings on unceasing prayer were part of the development of what would eventually become known in Hesychast writings as The Jesus Prayer, its standard version first explicitly referenced in the *Discourse on Abba Philimon* (ca. AD 600). It is also known as the Prayer of the Heart, The Prayer of Remembrance, The Prayer of a Single Thought, or simply The Prayer. Its basic formula was found in a letter to an abbot attributed to John Climacus: "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy." See: See Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 125.

15 John Climacus, as the author came to be known, is a moniker derived from the title of the text, and can be translated as "John of the Ladder."

16 As Henrik Rydell Johnsen points out in *Reading John Climacus*, a Latin translation of *The Ladder* is known as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and it was more widely read in the West after Angelo Clareno's translation from around 1300.

17 Colm Luibheid, preface to *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), xxvii.

18 Luibheid, 83.



these charisms and whose ultimate communion with God is precisely a gift rather than an “achievement,” gained through a process of renunciation in which much more is gained than lost. As the monk gradually loses his attachments and achieves *hesychia* (stillness), he becomes filled with the Holy Spirit and thereby manifests the “signs” of the true ascetic. Thus the path of *The Ladder* is both open to all in theory, and contingent upon the monastic environment in practice.

From its origins in the Sinai, *The Ladder* spread to other monasteries in the East, as evidenced by the high number of manuscripts and translations, the first Syrian translation already appearing in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> At Sinai, John’s teachings continued to be highly valued, preserved, and re-inscribed into the monastic tradition, laying the foundations for the Sinaite spiritual “school” attributed to Hesychius (7-8<sup>th</sup> century) and Philotheus (9-10<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>20</sup> What was particularly important for their use of *The Ladder* and for later Byzantine and Slavic monastic traditions was John’s category of “attention” to sinful thoughts, which became the dominant theme in their Spiritual Chapters and would become associated in the Hesychast movement with “authentic” monastic tradition, becoming integral to Russian monasticism as well.<sup>21</sup> In Step 28, “On Prayer,” John ties the practice of prayer directly to attention:

The beginning of prayer is the expulsion of distractions from the very start by a single thought; the middle stage is the concentration on what is being said or thought; its conclusion is rapture in the Lord.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the Step, John warns against the interference of thoughts and images in prayer, warning that even one careless word had the power to defile the mind and sap the power of his prayer (279-280). Defiling or distracting thoughts, which become conflated with demons, are said to lessen with the constant practice of prayer. To achieve constant dialogue with God is to develop the power to consistently repel those demons; they may continue their attacks, but they will quickly abandon them when confronted with the strong presence of the divine. Attention is tied closely to discernment, Step 26 and one of the three “higher virtues of the ‘active life’” which make way for union with God, the “contemplative life” which is the final goal, described in Steps 27-30. Discernment of what is truly good (i.e., of God) and what is bad (distracting from God and thereby demonic), the interrogation of each thought and image that materializes in the mind, is fundamental to stillness, which cannot be reached as long as the mind is “polluted.”

### **The Rise of Hesychasm**

John’s instructions on prayer, the stated purpose of which was to help monks approach the apostles’ experience of the transfigured Christ, became a crucial aspect of an immensely influential monastic movement in Byzantine monasticism and then in Russia—Hesychasm, which is generally described by scholars as having “arrived” in Russia via the South Slavs in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. It might be said that in 14<sup>th</sup> century Hesychasm, John Climacus’ anthropology—his over-arching focus on earthly

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19 Johnsen, 6.

20 Chryssaugis, 40.

21 Dirk Krausmuller, “The rise of hesychasm,” in *Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 5: Eastern Christianity*, ed. Michael Angold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 104.

22 Luibheid, 276.

self-transformation—gains its fullest expression, being oriented towards the absolute unity of body and soul in prayer. For example, Hesychastic “methodologies” draw on John’s correlations between bodily posture and inward prayer, such as lifting up one’s hands and eyes in reference to the Desert Fathers’ description of the monk as “standing with arms stretched out in the form of a cross to heaven.”<sup>23</sup> *Hesychia* is a central concept for John, defined as “worshipping God unceasingly.”<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, these methodologies build upon John’s work of synthesizing Patristic thought as practice.

The first “treatise” associated with the beginnings of Hesychasm as a movement is *The Three Methods of Prayer* also known as *The Method of Sacred Prayer and Attentiveness*, a manual on attaining visions. Now widely regarded as having been wrongly attributed to Symeon the New Theologian (henceforth Pseudo-Symeon), the work can be tentatively dated to the late 12<sup>th</sup> or early 13<sup>th</sup> century and describes a “method” to be used by the monk to experience the divine in which “attentiveness” leads to the “detection and seizure of sinful thoughts,” followed by effective prayer to eliminate them.<sup>25</sup> The second “treatise,” *On Guarding the Heart*, was composed by Nikephoros the Hesychast (or “the Italian,” as he is called in the *Life* of his student Gregory Palamas) on Mt. Athos in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. In both cases, while drawing heavily on the Sinaite tradition of John Climacus, the authors of these texts stress the need and possibility for every monk to attempt to access the divine, in the case of Nikephoros especially expanding the practice beyond the “select few” whom John envisioned attaining *hesychia*, meaning both solitary life and the advanced forms of inner prayer. This expansion of access is seen in later proponents of Hesychasm as well. For example, Philotheos Kokkinos’ biography of Gregory Palamas includes an episode in which Gregory argues successfully with a monk to prove that Paul’s injunction to “pray without ceasing”<sup>26</sup> is a universal one.<sup>27</sup> This slight democratization of access in the development of Hesychasm may well account at least partially for the eventual popularity of *The Ladder* among laity. Nevertheless, it was a monastic audience that remained the primary consideration of Hesychastic writers. The perceptible shift in access was likely not directed at laity, but rather at the spiritual hierarchies established by the performance of ascetic feats within monasteries.

Hesychasm became popular in Greece initially through exchange between Athonite and Sinaite monks, including Gregory of Sinai (1260s-1346), who lived on both mountains throughout his life and communicated Sinaite spiritual traditions to Athos. It was in large part through the dissemination of Hesychasm throughout the Orthodox world that *The Ladder* became such an important monastic text in Russia, although it was certainly extant and in use in many monasteries prior to the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>28</sup> as part of a body of key works including the writings of Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory the Great, Basil the Great, Ephrem the Syrian, John Chrysostom,

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23 Chryssaugis, 106.

24 Kallistos Ware, introduction to *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 50.

25 Krausmuller, 102

26 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

27 Kallistos Ware, “Act out of Stillness”: *The Influence of 14<sup>th</sup> Century Hesychasm on Byzantine and Slav Civilization* (Toronto: The Thessalonikean Society of Metro Toronto, 1995), 10.

28 While there is no list of extant manuscripts of *The Ladder* in Church Slavonic, there are at least 100, the earliest perhaps from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, pointing to its influence in shaping the earliest monasteries in the Slavic Orthodox world even before the introduction of a Hesychast “movement.”

John Damascene, Maximus, and Hippolytus of Rome.<sup>29</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> century did, however, witness a peak in the interest in contemplative monasticism in Russia, and during this time *The Ladder* was one of the most popular texts copied by monks.<sup>30</sup> The interest in the original texts of contemplative monasticism also inspired the translation of the books of Isaac the Syrian, Simeon the New Theologian, and Gregory the Sinaite into Slavonic for the first time.<sup>31</sup> Arguably, the Hesychast movement in Russia can be viewed in the context of the “traditionalist” revivals that mark Russian monastic history. Although Rus’ had officially adopted Orthodox Christianity less than four centuries prior and had thus ostensibly received a “ready-made” tradition that its Church was responsible for preserving, we can already see in the 14<sup>th</sup> century a search for roots and a desire, at least on the part of monks and some of the few literate members of the devout laity, to access the foundational texts of the faith. While a detailed analysis of the motivations behind this tendency are beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted, as Irina Paert observes in her monograph on spiritual eldership in Russia,<sup>32</sup> that the practice of early Russian Hesychasm was congruent with the widespread hermeticism and idiorhythmic<sup>33</sup> monasticism of the period, during which Rus’ was still under Mongol rule and had seen many monasteries looted and destroyed during the initial invasions. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Church, which had filled the need for the production of a national as well as religious identity in the absence of political power, had come to conceptualize the “Mongol Yoke” as a punishment for the sins of Rus’, a notion that could not but inspire the most devout to seek out the spiritual path from which Rus’ had strayed. This search would account not only for the concern with original texts and practices but also for the widespread interest in methods of a more perfect communion with God, through which the monk could perform “purificatory prayers” for the Church at large. As Paert points out, interest in Hesychasm faced a challenge in the dearth of organized monastic communities, as idiorhythmic communities (not to mention hermetic life) did not always provide the structure assumed by Hesychast texts:

The acquisition by Russian monks and hermits of hesychast texts and techniques had a spontaneous character and, although monks and laity in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century could practice hesychastic prayer, it is unlikely that they received any instruction.<sup>34</sup>

This seems to indicate that in practice, *The Ladder* continued to play a similar role during the rise of the Hesychast movement as it had in the previous centuries since the Christianization of Rus’ in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, albeit more widespread and perhaps with a greater awareness of taking part in a pan-Orthodox revival. If Paert’s assertion

29 Sergius Bolshakoff, *Russian Mystics* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1999), xxi.

30 Irina Paert, *Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 25.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Idiorhythmic monasticism refers to hermetic monks living alone, rather than in an organized community. In practice, as stated above, many monks on the idiorhythmic path did live in proximity to other hermits and came together for certain purposes. For John Climacus, pure hermeticism prevented crucial aspects of self-perfection, especially obedience. He recommended “the middle way,” sketic life, in which a small group of monks participates in communal services and shares resources while maintaining their solitary practices. Nil of Sora and Paisii Velichkovsky also favored the “middle way.”

34 Paert 25.



about the dearth of spiritual instruction is correct, then it is likely that *The Ladder's* peak of popularity could be attributed to those aspects that had already given it wide appeal. Because the treatise exhibits a fairly high degree of flexibility in terms of living arrangements and ascetic practices, it was an ideal textual companion to idiorhythmic monastic practice.

### Nil Sorsky's Monastic Rule

Yet the first major move towards organization and the institutionalization of spiritual instruction would also come in the 14<sup>th</sup> century through the activity of Sergius of Radonezh (1314-1392), particularly his direct teaching of disciples. Textually and methodically, it would emerge in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the writings of Nilus of Sora (a.k.a. Nil Sorsky, 1433-1508), who composed the first Russian synthesis of patristic teaching and the methodologies of contemplative prayer. If before the rise of Hesychast influence *The Ladder* could be said to exercise a general influence on the development of Russian monasticism, with the work of Nil John's text became an integral part of the developing corpus of uniquely Russian monastic writings, the authors of which strove, like John Climacus, to present themselves not as innovators but as synthesizers and teachers of the Patristic tradition.

Nil Sorsky's monastic *Rule* (Ustav), in which direct citations and references to John Climacus first appeared in Slavonic was, true to John's example, in fact closer to a treatise on contemplative prayer than to a systematic *Rule* of monastic discipline such as that composed by Josif Volotsky (1439-1515) or, in the wider Orthodox tradition, by Basil the Great. Similarly to John before him, Nil exhibits a familiar concern with inscribing his text into the Eastern monastic tradition that was already perceived as sacred wisdom in John's time and, by extension, writing Russian monasticism into the company of Orthodoxy's true heirs. Again like John, Nil's primary contribution to the development of Russian monasticism was systemization. Nil conceived of an organized formulation of the Hesychastic tradition that had been passed along in various guises to early Russian saints including Anthony of Smolensk and Sergei of Radonezh, who had practiced aspects of the hesychast approach to prayer but had lacked the patristic learning necessary to synthesize the tradition and present it in the language of the Russian Church.<sup>35</sup> Nil's privilege was his familiarity not only with the Hesychast writings but with their sources, especially the 4<sup>th</sup> century writings of Evagrius which were also foundational for John.<sup>36</sup> Nil depends on *The Ladder* most clearly in the *Rule* in presenting the psychological steps of the development in the mind of an individual thought: the presentation or the arising in the mind of a representation, subject or image; the coupling, conversation or dialogue with the image; consent given to the thought; slavery to it; and passion. Based on these steps, Nil develops an analysis of the eight sources of passions, defined as principal vices of the soul, recalling the struggle against the passions which form the middle steps (8-23) of *The Ladder*.<sup>37</sup> Nil's representation of the formulation of a thought and its consequences implicitly references "attentiveness" and "discernment," which are two of John's primary tools in the struggle against the distractions that disrupt progress towards

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35 George A. Maloney and John L. Mina, introduction to *The Complete Writings* by Nil Sorsky, trans. Maloney and Mina (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 35.

36 Maloney and Mina, 24.

37 Ibid.

*hesychia*. John's influence is even more explicit in his *Tradition of Sketic Life*, in which Nil specifically quotes John several times and explicitly focuses on "attention" in the resistance of thoughts and references John's instructions on silence and concentration:

Strive with active concentration on the task of God alone. St. Basil the Great says that the beginning of purity of heart is silence. And St. John Climacus further defines silence as, first of all, detachment from concern with regard to necessary and unnecessary things; second, as assiduous prayer; and third, as the unremitting action of prayer of the heart.<sup>38</sup>

"Attentiveness," or the undying vigilance against intrusive thoughts (even "virtuous" thoughts) as developed by John, was understood by the proponents of Hesychasm as an integral component of the monastic tradition of the Orthodox East, with themselves as its true heirs and defenders against either intellectualizing or over-asceticizing trends.<sup>39</sup> Attention, as previously mentioned, was at the heart of the *Spiritual Chapters* of Hesychius and Philotheus. The identification of "attention" with "authentic" Orthodoxy implicitly invokes *The Ladder* as a text of inviolable authority.

Nil also devotes his eighth chapter of the Tradition to the gift of tears, one of the most influential elements of *The Ladder* (Step 7, "On Sorrow and Weeping"). John's reflection on tears is reflective of his stress on the unity of body and soul in prayer; tears, when directed towards non-worldly things, can become an outward manifestation of the individual's "mourning" his separation from God in prayer, a mourning that must be felt deeply and continually as he attempts to overcome this separation. However, as Chrysosgis points out, John's most original contribution to the theology of tears was his association between mourning and joy. "Tears reflect man's fallen state and express his mourning for sin," yet they also express his realization that he was created for laughter, not tears and can even wash away sins in the manner of a renewed baptism.<sup>40</sup>

## Startsy

Other aspects of the "general influence" of *The Ladder* on Russian monasticism include the institution of eldership and the formalized practice of unceasing prayer that invokes the name of Jesus, or the Jesus Prayer, as it would come to be called. As already mentioned, according to Irina Paert the extent to which eldership as a widespread institution existed in the Petrine era is arguable; at the same time, as Paert affirms, it is inarguable that informal eldership did exist, and in fact lead to the formulation of idiorhythmic communities made up of an elder and several disciples:

New hermitages in pre-Petrine Russia would often emerge around *startsy* who had left their 'mother' monastery in a search of a more radical form of withdrawal from the world. *Startsy* were followed by their disciples, who formed new monastic communities.<sup>41</sup>

As an integral part of hesychasm, eldership is also practiced in the original idiorhythmic community of Sergius of Radonezh and prescribed in the *Rules* of Nil as well as Josif

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38 Maloney and Mina, 23.

39 Krausmuller, 102.

40 Luibheid, 23.

41 Paert, 47.

Volotsky. In Nil's *Rule*, choosing an elder is the second step in the monk's striving from renunciation to self-perfection, a decision of great importance and requiring careful discernment. However, Nil acknowledges the possibility that no guide can be found. In this situation he advises that the monk should search for God directly through the body of holy writings: Scripture, the writings of the Apostles, the commentaries on these writings by the Fathers, and the writings and lives of the holy Fathers.<sup>42</sup> This advice in fact provides a fascinating insight into how the elder, or spiritual guide, was perceived in the contemplative monastic tradition as Nil (and by all accounts John as well) understood it: as a conduit of the Holy Spirit rather than as a wise man; as one who, by virtue of his practice of stillness, has become a vessel for divine wisdom. This is why, in the absence of such a guide, the contemplation of holy writings—likewise vessels of holy wisdom when approached with discernment and absolute obedience—constitute an acceptable substitute. If, as Paert asserts, the practice of Hesychasm was “learned by many without any supervision, on the basis of written texts,” this certainly goes a long way to explain the large number of Slavonic copies of *The Ladder*.<sup>43</sup>

### Texts in Spiritual Practice

It should be mentioned that the *Lankton Codex* bears the evidence of an anxiety towards the use of texts in spiritual practice, which may point to the scribe's awareness of this situation in Russian monastic history, though it may also be a reflection of a general anxiety in Eastern Orthodoxy concerning the unmediated use of religious texts. One of the few features that differentiate the *Codex* from the 1647 manuscript from which it was copied is the colophon, which reads:

Glory to you, Lord of Lords and King of Kings. To the Creator of the world is rendered glory, thanks, honor and worship; to the All-Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Like a journey, I was very afraid to start this soul-saving Book of Blessed John of the Ladder and to finish it.

This colophon, while certainly formulaic in its display of deference to the text as a part of Church tradition, gestures more generally towards the perceived dangers of interacting with holy teachings through reading. The monk's fears may be attributed not only to his concern that the text is faithfully transmitted and free from corruption, but also to a concern regarding the future use of the manuscript considering its goals. This was, perhaps, an even greater cause for concern in 1837, the year of its copying, when interest in contemplative prayer had grown beyond the monastery.

### Unceasing Prayer

The Jesus Prayer, as it would come to be called by the Hesychasts of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, is the second realm of what the author refers to as John's “general influence” on Russian monasticism. The importance of unceasing prayer in Step 15 constitutes the focal point of *The Ladder*'s spiritual system, which calls upon the individual to become “conscious of the actual presence of Jesus in the interior of his own being,” and is likewise at the center

<sup>42</sup> Maloney and Mina, 19.

<sup>43</sup> For a detailed discussion of the textual dimensions of ascetic practice see Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

of the Hesychastic practices which evolved from the Evagrian conception of perfect prayer as stillness.<sup>44</sup> Crucial for its simplicity and the irreducible focus of its repetition, this prayer is instrumental in transforming the monk into a “hesychast;” i.e., one who possesses silence of heart, whose inward journey into stillness leads him to the ultimate encounter with God—an encounter that renders irrelevant all that he has had to “give up” in the worldly sense.<sup>45</sup> The practice of unceasing prayer is of course not an invention of John Climacus; rather, its origins can be traced to Makarius of Egypt (300-391), Evagrius Ponticus’ master who, according to an account in the *Philokalia*, taught his monks that words beyond “Lord, save me!” were extraneous to “pure prayer.”<sup>46</sup> Like the rest of the theological concepts and practices in *The Ladder*, John draws on tradition (though he does not cite his specific sources for his reflection on unceasing prayer) and takes the additional step of integrating unceasing prayer into a system of self-perfection, which subsequently becomes a central component of Siniatic tradition as a whole and which represents the central method of “attentiveness.”<sup>47</sup> John’s spiritual heir Philotheus writes:

Sweet memory of God, that is, of Jesus, coupled with heartfelt wrath and beneficent contrition, can always annihilate all the fascination of thoughts, the variety of suggestions ... daringly seeking to devour our souls. Jesus when invoked easily burns up all this. For in no other place can we find salvation except in Jesus Christ ... . And so every hour and every moment let us zealously guard our heart from thoughts obscuring the mirror of the soul, which should contain, drawn and imprinted on it, only the radiant image of Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom and power of God the Father.<sup>48</sup>

Gregory of Sinai, the most prominent disseminator of Hesychast spirituality in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, also drew on John’s (as well as Pseudo-Simeon’s) conception of the unceasing prayer as a tool of attention that was to become aligned with the beating of the heart and to control the thoughts of the individual, allowing the heart to be in a ceaseless state of prayer.<sup>49</sup> *The Ladder* is on Gregory of Sinai’s list of essential reading on silence and prayer for the Hesychast.<sup>50</sup>

It was not only Nil Sorsky who directly referenced John Climacus in his monastic *Rule*. His contemporary, Josif Volotsky, also incorporated aspects of *The Ladder* into his own *Rule*, which was adopted by many other Russian monasteries and was widely

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44 John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 33.

45 Luibheid, 50.

46 Meyendorff, 18.

47 In his introduction to Luibheid and Russell’s translation of *The Ladder*, Kallistos Ware hypothesizes that Diadochus of Photice is John’s main inspiration in his treatment of the Jesus Prayer. Diadochus observes that the human intellect must be provided with some inner task to satisfy its need for activity. (53)

48 George A Maloney, *The Spirituality of Nil Sorsky* (Rome: Westmalle, 1964), 2.

49 Maloney, 5.

50 Maloney, 6.



influential.<sup>51</sup> As David Goldfrank<sup>52</sup>, Tom Dykstra<sup>53</sup> and others have demonstrated, whatever may have been the extent of the controversy between the approaches to monastic land-holding represented by Nil and Josif in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the two were in agreement on the fundamentals of Orthodoxy as well as their approach to monastic prayer including “stillness.” As Goldfrank details in his article “Nil Sorskii’s Following among the Iosifo-Volokolamsk Elders,” there is textual evidence that Josif sent a pair of literate monks to the Trans-Volgan monastery specifically to train in Hesychasm and to bring its textual traditions back to Volokolamsk and that he himself was trained in and could teach this method of prayer. All the same, it is indisputable that Josif’s *Rule*, based as it was specifically on cenobitic monasticism, focused more closely on issues of discipline and obedience within that environment and reflected the increased concerns with monastic discipline that accompanied the movement towards cenobitism in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is not, therefore, surprising that it is those sections of *The Ladder* that deal with training in obedience as a prerequisite for stillness which find their way into Josif’s writings.<sup>54</sup> In his *Rule*, anxious as his predecessors to inscribe his instruction into Church tradition, Josif describes the relationship between abbot and his subordinates with references to Climacus as well as the Fathers.<sup>55</sup> More generally, in his *Rule*, Josif expands the concept of the elder (*starets*) by setting up a ruling council of 12 elders whose role it was both to regulate the monks and represent them to the abbot, and to correct the abbot himself if he violated the *Rule*.<sup>56</sup>

It is also fair to point out that the specific disciplines of communal monastic life on which Josif’s rule is overwhelmingly focused, by necessity, deemphasize the centrality of self-transformation to the path of the monk. If Josif’s rule was most widely adopted for its specificity, in this tendency we see a shift away from the anti-prescriptivism of *The Ladder* and its textual heirs. An example of this tendency is Josif’s taxonomy of ascetics based on clothing in his *Rule*, with the most perfect of monks owning one set, in poor condition, and having no protection from the elements.

The self-perceived traditionalism of John and his heirs belies the fact that the program of individual transcendence, if in keeping with the wisdom of the early Church Fathers within their particular context, nevertheless presented a challenge for the institutional Orthodox church even as a monastic practice, to say nothing of its relationship to lay piety. The work of Gregory of Sinai (d. 1346), a monk first on Sinai and then on Athos, who holds perhaps the greatest share of credit for propagating the movement of Hesychasm<sup>57</sup>, is also responsible for neutralizing its possible dangers vis-a-vis the Church by stressing the advanced nature of visionary experiences and the need of beginners to submit to experienced practitioners.<sup>58</sup> Through these caveats, Gregory addresses possible

51 Dykstra, 27.

52 David Goldfrank, “Recentring Nil Sorski: The Evidence from the Sources,” *Russian Review* 66, no. 2 (2007).

53 Tom Dykstra, *Russian Monastic Culture: “Josephism” and the Iosifo-Volokolamsk Monastery* (Munich: Verlag Otto Agner, 2006).

54 Goldfrank, 362.

55 Paert, 26.

56 Dykstra, 27.

57 This includes Slavdom. According to Kallistos Ware in *The Influence of 14<sup>th</sup> Century Hesychasm*, the monastery of Kilifarevo, “founded by Gregory’s Bulgarian disciple St. Theodosios of Turnovo, acted as a decisive center for the dissemination of Hesychasm in the Slav world.” (18)

58 Bolshakoff, xxii.

problems arising from an individualized religious practice that identifies as definitively Orthodox while in many cases circumventing the structures of authority in place.<sup>59</sup> While *The Ladder* and subsequent texts leading up to and including what is considered the Hesychast literary corpus stress the need for an elder and the practice of absolute obedience, this practice is not necessarily incompatible with such circumvention, in theory allowing one erring monk to lead another without the checks of the hierarchy. Equally threatening to the life of the Church was over-fixation on ecstatic visions and other mystical experiences, which threatened to obscure the importance of day-to-day sacramental life.

Gregory Palamas (d. 1360), also of Athos and a propagator of Hesychasm, did his part to reinforce the compatibility of Hesychasm with dogmatic theology in his arguments with the scholar Barlaam of Calabria, who accused the Eastern monks of heresy.<sup>60</sup> Demonstrating the validity of the Hesychast approach within the doctrine of the Trinity and the Fall, Gregory Palamas defended Hesychasm as a method for the fallen man to reunite with God and reconciled the Hesychast approach with the dogmatic teaching regarding the inaccessibility of God. It should be noted that Gregory's anthropology directly echoes that of John. Chryssaugis in fact credits John with the first Eastern Orthodox articulation of anthropology, which the Fathers left ambiguous. John bases the endeavor of *The Ladder* on the premise that the body, directly related to God in the creation, seeks God in its natural condition.<sup>61</sup> The body must thus be "converted into a means of relating to God."<sup>62</sup> As Chryssaugis notes, "the theme of the glorified body is central to patristic and ascetic spirituality."<sup>63</sup> In definitively linking the doctrine of the glorified body to the mature practice of Hesychasm, Gregory's theological foundation for the practice was imposed on the Church at large, reinforcing its claims to a tradition traceable to the Fathers.<sup>64</sup> Without such grounding, the Hesychast movement was not likely to be established, let alone to gain a strong foothold in 14<sup>th</sup> century Russia.

### Monastery Organization and Its Role

In the Russian context, we can see how the form of desert spirituality expounded by John Climacus both flourished and found itself construed as a threat throughout the development of Russian government and ecclesiastical administration. Until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, monasteries were not only the spiritual and cultural centers of Russian society, especially during the years of Mongol rule, but were also the centers of literacy in a society where even members of the nobility and the parish clergy could rarely read and write well into the modern period. Texts produced by monks and transmitted through teaching and preaching played a key role in shaping Russian "national self-consciousness," placing the role of the Russian Church in preserving "authentic" Orthodox tradition at its center as well as, increasingly in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, producing chronicles reflecting the ideological aspirations of princes.<sup>65</sup> As mentioned earlier, until the 14<sup>th</sup> century Russian

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59 Krausmuller, 109.

60 Bolshakoff, 21.

61 Chryssaugis, 53.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Krausmuller, 124.

65 Dykstra, 9.

monasticism was varied in organizational approach, from idiorhythmic groups of monks living independently and coming together for certain rituals to strictly organized cenobitic communities under the authority of an abbot (*igumen*), with the idiorhythmic style being far more common.<sup>66</sup> Fundamental changes began in the 14<sup>th</sup> century with Sergius of Radonezh, who in 1345 founded the Trinity-Sergius monastery that would eventually become the largest and wealthiest in Russia. The monastery functioned idiorhythmically until 1356, and, as a teacher of disciples, Sergius was an important disseminator of hesychast practices, his activities constituting a culmination of the interest in “stillness” and the methods of contemplative prayer and mystical experience that were at the height of popularity in his time. Alongside his instruction of disciples in prayer, however, Sergius was instrumental in the movement towards greater organization in Russian monasticism. He transformed his community into a cenobitic monastery to the strong opposition of monks but with the approval of the hierarchy. Sergius’ transformation started a trend of idiorhythmic communities adopting cenobitic rule and the foundation of new cenobitic monasteries. As Tom E. Dykstra demonstrates in his monograph on “Josephism” and Russian monastic culture, resistance to cenobitic organization, including the departure of monks from formerly idiorhythmic communities, can be understood at least in part by the “democratization” of cenobitic life in terms of its expectations that everyone live and work in common, proving distasteful to higher-born monks.<sup>67</sup> As always seeking to inscribe current monastic practice into Church tradition, during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries several compilations of the sayings of the Fathers were produced focusing on monastic obedience, no doubt reflecting the difficulties that were either anticipated or encountered by the hierarchs of the Church in their promotion of cenobitism. Nevertheless, sketes and other loosely organized communities continued to form.

Josif Volotsky is considered to be the heir of this over-arching cenobitic trend although, as already mentioned in the discussion of *The Ladder* as reflected in the works of Josif and Nil, scholars of Russian monasticism have demonstrated the misleading nature of dividing 16<sup>th</sup> century monasticism into warring camps of “possessors” and “non-possessors,” the latter represented by eremitism. Nevertheless, it is true that there was tension between the two monastic traditions even if its leaders were united on wider questions of Orthodoxy. Josif was a proponent of the right of monasteries (not monks) to own landed property, while the Transvolgan Elders, led by Nil, argued that there was no real difference between the two. But more importantly, their visions differed on the role of the monastery within the larger community. Josif’s support of monastic lands and property was rooted in the vision of a monastery as a charitable center, grounded in the tradition of Basil the Great. Nil’s rejection of monastic property was congruent with his vision of monasticism as an endeavor focused solely on personal salvation. Even if the root of the disagreement was at its base about the centrality or extent of the practice of contemplative prayer in a monk’s life, there is no question that Josif’s vision fit more closely with what the kingdom needed from the Church as a whole. In addition to ideological support, Moscow was able to use monasteries such as Josif’s for monetary support by confiscating their resources or for political support by sending prisoners to be forcibly tonsured.<sup>68</sup>

What was at stake for the larger Church was not “possession” or “non-possession” as

66 Dykstra, 18.

67 Dykstra, 19.

68 Dykstra, 28-36.

such. The overarching concern was the future of Russian monasticism as a predominantly cenobitic or idiorhythmic institution and, on a larger scale, the role of monasticism in the Church and in the development of Russian society, with the lands of Rus' undergoing unification and centralization in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The tension present between monasticism and the larger Church, which had accompanied the development of monasticism as a practice long before its introduction in Russia was, it seems to the author, primarily a tension about what it meant for the Christian to separate oneself from the world and the extent of the responsibility that the monk had to ecclesiastical hierarchy, to laity, and to the sovereign. Devotion to contemplative monasticism and “stillness”—which, as we have seen, was not absent from cenobiticism—would become conflated with eremitism or sketic life, which both threatened heresy and prevented monks from charitable activities as well as state-serving endeavors such as the composition of chronicles and the collection of donations and land taxes. Despite the interests of the Church, however, attempts to institutionalize cenobiticism as the standard monastic model were not wholly successful; as Scott Kenworthy points out in *Heart of Russia*, the idiorhythmic rule had again become dominant by the 17<sup>th</sup> century:

The idiorhythmic rule seems to have devolved from a skete rule, except that it no longer applied to a semi-eremitical form of monastic life but to large monasteries; according to this way of life, the monks could keep some personal property and sometimes owned their own cells and provided their own meals. Because of their relative independence, strict discipline became difficult to enforce. Despite repeated efforts to tackle this problem, it persisted not only throughout the eighteenth century but even until the Revolution.<sup>69</sup>

These tensions are not surprising, as we cannot forget that the roots of Hesychasm lie with the “first hermits who fled into the barren deserts of Egypt and Syria during the 4<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>70</sup> Moreover, by many accounts, the roots of monasticism lie in the reaction to the perceived worldly corruption of the Church that accompanied the legitimization of Christianity in late Roman society. While in the Russian context the initial popularity of Hesychasm as well as its “revival” in the 18<sup>th</sup> century correlates in both cases with a renewed interest in “roots” and “authenticity” and the foundational works of Hesychasm are always cited as the locus of unbreakable tradition which Russian Christianity ostensibly strives only to preserve and propagate, there exists a history of the evolution of these writings within the contexts of new interpretative strategies that exhibit a growing necessity to balance the goals of contemplative prayer with the demands of a hierarchically structured church.

### **The Golden Age of Russian Mysticism**

When Paisii Velichkovsky (1722-1794), a name synonymous with the “golden age” of Russian mysticism, embarked on his monastic journey, his desire for the contemplative life by necessity took him outside of his native Ukraine, where according to tradition he rejected the Jesuit-inspired curriculum of the Kiev Mogila Academy, to Mt. Athos (1746) and eventually to Neamt, Moldavia (1763), where he established a thriving monastic

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69 Scott M. Kenworthy, *The Heart of Russia: Trinity-Sergius, Monasticism and Society after 1825* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.

70 Maloney and Mina, 21.



community that boasted over 700 monks by the time of his death.<sup>71</sup> Paisii spent his early monastic career on a search for the roots of Orthodoxy and his mature career as a spiritual authority in the practice of what he and his disciples considered “authentic” Eastern Christianity, which was inseparable from contemplative prayer. While still a novice in the Lubech monastery, he hand-copied *The Ladder*; he searched for, transcribed and translated ancient manuscripts to correct inaccurate Slavonic translations of the Fathers.<sup>72</sup> Although Hesychasm was a forgotten spiritual practice on Athos by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Paisii discovered patristic writings on prayer, including those of Basil the Great.

The fact that Paisii embraced Hesychasm as an integral part of authentic Orthodox monasticism at a time when it was neglected in Greece is, in the author’s view, vitally important for the “traditionalist” conceptualization of the revival of contemplative monasticism for several reasons. First, in the previous century the Nikonian reforms, which had precipitated a schism in the Russian Orthodox Church, were presented in the framework of traditionalism and returning to the roots of Orthodox Christianity by bringing “corrupted” Russian ritual and liturgy in line with the Greek. As many works concerning the schism have demonstrated, the reforms met with a great deal of resistance not only because they explicitly anathematized Russian Orthodox traditions and condemned accepted practices as heretical, but more vitally because Russian Orthodoxy had, since the Council of Florence and the fall of Constantinople, come to be conceptualized in ecclesiastical literature, sermons and, accordingly, in the minds of the faithful as the guardian of authentic Orthodoxy in contrast to the Greeks, who had themselves become “corrupted” and experienced divine wrath as a result. Paisii’s position here is two-sided. In a sense, Paisii’s work does not affirm the existence of a gulf between Greek and Russian practice either as it was expressed by reformers or by the Old Believers. On the one hand, his focus on original sources and his translation and dissemination of books from Athos echoed the already established practice of using Greek texts to get at the “essence” of Orthodoxy which had become “clouded,” either by the “ineptitude” of Russian clergy and scribes, as Nikon and his supporters would have it, or by the creeping influence of scholasticism and other Catholic trends, as Paisii and his disciples held. On the other hand, Paisii’s work to revive Hesychasm hearkens back to a flourishing age of Russian monasticism and mysticism and, perhaps more importantly, cultivates a form of monasticism that was, in fact, preserved in Russia even throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century, albeit in increasingly smaller and less visible communities or as a de-emphasized component of cenobitic life, as we see in Josif’s widespread *Rule*.<sup>73</sup>

Paisii was forced to leave Russia in his search of “authentic” Orthodoxy as the result of a range of forces generally grouped under the heading “Westernization” and, more concretely in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, “Petrine reforms.” In the Church, the reforms were preceded by the growing influence of Jesuit scholasticism on Orthodox education, first in Kiev and then in Moscow, originally rooted in fears of Russian conversions to the Roman Church in the Slavic borderlands between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. The new

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71 Simon Dixon, “The Russian Orthodox Church in Imperial Russia 1721-1917,” in *Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 5: Eastern Christianity*, ed. Michael Angold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 339.

72 Paert, 35.

73 Of the 220 monasteries that were founded in Russia in 17<sup>th</sup> century, some, such as the Zelenetsky Monastery founded by St. Martirius, continued the monastic life prescribed by Nil Sorsky, in which “stillness” and contemplative prayer were the focus.

approach to Orthodox education greatly de-emphasized the Fathers and aimed to arm the Orthodox believer with a defense against the “heretical” reasoning of Catholics, a task that had little to do with cultivating a contemplative practice. Likewise, the very existence of these new centers of Orthodox education were demonstrative of an integral social role for monks, who had formed brotherhoods for the establishment of the academies and presses; such monks had taught Paisii at the Kiev-Mohila Academy and, as mentioned, according to tradition their “corrupt” Latin theology had sent him to Athos.

### Suppression of Monasteries

It was during Peter’s reign that the tension between contemplative monasticism and the demands of the contemporary Church in terms of its social role became a full-blown conflict. The leading religious legislator of Peter’s era, Feofan Prokopovich (1681-1736), himself educated at the Kiev-Mohila Academy and subsequently in Poland and Rome, declared contemplative monasticism to be antithetical to the needs of the state and gave expression to Peter’s conviction that monks—but especially hermits, ascetics and mystic—served no useful purpose in society. Prokopovich also warned that hermeticism posed spiritual dangers, isolating the individual from proper teaching and guidance, and the law treated hermits as potentially dangerous leaders of dissent.<sup>74</sup> The Supplement to the Ecclesiastical Regulation, which imposed the cenobitic rule on all Russian monasteries, dictated that no monastery should have fewer than thirty monks, decreed that monks would not be allowed to build hermitages in the wilderness, and forbid the formation of new monastic communities without express permission from the Synod, all measures to combat anchoritic and sketic monasticism as well as to limit the growth of monastic ranks as a whole.<sup>75</sup>

Because monasteries were sites of dissent against the reforms, they also became sites of state suppression. Laws against freedom of movement and against the keeping of pens and paper were instituted to prevent monks and nuns from fomenting discontent and, in practice, relegated monks to the status of non-privileged groups such as serfs.<sup>76</sup> The 1721 Ecclesiastical Regulation and subsequent decrees aimed to centralize the monasteries and limit the growth of the monastic ranks as much as possible. Between 1724 and 1738, the span of fourteen years, the number of monks and nuns dropped almost 50 percent, from 25,207 to 14,282.<sup>77</sup>

In 1764, Catherine II expropriated the monastic lands and their peasants, abolishing an additional 496 houses.<sup>78</sup> Those monasteries that remained struggled to fill their ranks due to the extreme restrictions on tonsure. Nevertheless, throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century “unsanctioned or semi-legal” monasteries of various sorts continuously appeared, in some cases as conscious protest.<sup>79</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, the paradoxical outcome of the suppression of monasticism was that it began to attract only the most devout postulants. As Scott Kenworthy observes in *The Heart of Russia: Trinity-Sergius, Monasticism, and Society after 1825*,

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74 Paert, 48.

75 Kenworthy, 15.

76 Paert, 42.

77 Dixon, 338.

78 Ibid.

79 Paert, 48.

By confiscating their estates and depriving the monasteries of their wealth, and by curtailing the number of monks, Catherine had ensured that those who were drawn to the monastery came for different reasons than in the past. If the monasteries had remained feudal landowners into the nineteenth century, they would likely have been as much the objects of popular resentment as of veneration, but they were largely free of popular anticlericalism because of Catherine's reforms. Monasteries drew their support and their recruits mostly from commoners, and these changes helped to reinvent monasticism as an institution in the social and economic landscape of the nineteenth century by foregrounding its withdrawal from the world and primarily spiritual nature.<sup>80</sup>

### Monastic Reform

Like their predecessors, Paisii and his followers were anxious to inscribe themselves into Christian Orthodox monastic tradition and to portray their activity as one of the revival of an unchanging tradition that had been neglected or forgotten, a goal accomplished by the "copying, translation, publication and dissemination of 'forgotten' ancient and medieval texts" and the "introduction of 'forgotten' forms of spiritual guidance," especially eldership.<sup>81</sup> However, the cultural conditions of Russian Orthodoxy at this time resulted in a fundamental disagreement over "ownership," as it were, of Church tradition and anxieties on the part of Synodal authorities regarding the appropriate role of elders and of mystical texts and practices vis-a-vis ecclesiastical hierarchy and the ordered sacramental life of the Christian. Even Peter, an unabashed reformer, cast his criticism of contemplative monasticism in traditionalist terms: In a decree in 1701, he used the rhetoric of tradition and corruption, stating that "ancient monks were industrious, produced their food with their own hands ... and fed many poor from their own hands," while contemporary monks who not only did not work, but relied on the labor of others.<sup>82</sup> Generally, however, it was under the banner of reform and Westernization, rather than traditionalism, that the suppression of monasticism was carried out, both by Peter and by subsequent monarchs in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, a traditionalist "reorientation" was beginning to take place, marked by a growing antipathy towards the "Latinizing" trends of the Kievan academies and their proponents. In 1815 the Jesuits were banned from Moscow and St. Petersburg, and in 1820 they were forbidden to enter the empire altogether.<sup>83</sup> The reign of Alexander I (1801-25), while seeing a proliferation of "fashionable mysticism that blurred denominational distinctions under the umbrella of universal Christianity" among the aristocracy, also witnessed a more widespread hostility towards these challenges or alternatives to dogmatic Orthodoxy.<sup>84</sup> Many Russian monks who had emigrated to Moldavia to join Paisii's community returned during Alexander I's reign, when state policy toward monasticism had changed, bringing back to Russia the principles of contemplative

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80 Kenworthy, 4.

81 Paert, 7.

82 Kenworthy, 15.

83 Dixon, 329.

84 Ibid.

prayer and reviving (or reinventing, as the case may be) the institution of eldership.<sup>85</sup>

The work of Paisii and his disciples ushered in a new generation of monks seeking the revived ideals of contemplative prayer. Yet there was undoubtedly a reinvention occurring as well. The Optina Pustyn monastery, which was revived at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century after having fallen into ruin under Catherine, became both the focal point of the new Russian contemplative monasticism and a spiritual center for laity.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps even more than in the pre-modern period, the monastery in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was becoming “the locus par excellence of encounter with the divine.”<sup>87</sup> Between 1808 and 1861, monasteries and religious communities again spread throughout Russia, with a 77 percent increase in the number of monks, nuns and novices.<sup>88</sup> As McGuckin convincingly argues in *The Life and Mission of St. Paisii Velichkovsky*, perhaps Paisii’s greatest achievement, for our purposes, was his work to reconcile cenobitic monasticism with contemplative prayer after a perceived artificial divide had solidified between them in contemporary Russian monasticism, working to “bring the lifestyles more closely back together; as distinctive, but not separate, spiritual paths.”<sup>89</sup> Like Gregory of Sinai before him, Paisii was careful to anticipate and answer accusations of hereticism. He stressed the fulfillment of the official structure of daily prayer and labor, but his focus was on the constant life of the Jesus Prayer that transcended all else. Although Paisii himself rejected the notion of “social usefulness” for a monastery, resisting attempts to involve his community in teaching or charity work, his legacy was the new Russian monastery of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which practitioners of contemplative prayer came to guide laymen and revive interest in Patristic writings among the faithful, the latter also a direct result of Paisii’s translation of the *Philokalia*.

It is thus the work of Paisii that can perhaps be most directly traced to the production of the *Lankton Codex*, a manuscript that signals the continued demand for the original sources of the methods of contemplative prayer and spiritual self-perfection in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century monastery two centuries after the Fathers began to fade from focus in mainstream Russian Orthodox theology. Its production represents a new era of Russian monasticism, one in which Westernization, secularization and modernization not only coexisted with flourishing monastic communities but in which these communities and their leaders actively informed literary, philosophical, and political trends.

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85 Paert, 52.

86 Laura Engelstein, *Slavophile Empire: Imperial Russia's Illiberal Path* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 110.

87 Kenworthy, 6.

88 Paert, 74

89 John A McGuckin, “The Life and Mission of St. Paisius Velichkovsky. An Early Modern Master of the Orthodox Spiritual Life.” *Spiritus* 9, no. 2 (2009):170.



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## FROM BIBLICAL PERSONAGE TO DEMON: JUDAS IN OLD RUSSIAN ICONOGRAPHY

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### Traitor, Arch Sinner and Demon

Of all the Biblical characters, Judas Iscariot, the traitor apostle, is the most demonized. In Mediaeval culture his role was that of an anti-model, epitomizing various sins and evil doings: Judas was “the greediest of merchants,” “the earthbound priest,” and “the avaricious Jew.” He is the embodiment of covetousness, treachery and despair.<sup>2</sup>

In Mediaeval apocryphal writings and legends, Judas turns into the ultimate wrongdoer or simply into a demon. His very name and genealogy stress this: Judas comes from the line of Dan, as will the Antichrist; his alias Iscariot (as Saint Jerome wrote in the 4<sup>th</sup> century) meant “money” and “price,” symbolizing his dreadful fortune<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1).

In the widely known 12<sup>th</sup> century *Tale of Judas the Betrayer*<sup>4</sup> Judas repeats the fate of Oedipus, killing his father and committing incest. Having learned the truth, he repents and becomes Christ’s disciple, but soon betrays the Savior himself. The apocryphal *Vision of Pseudo-Daniel* thus describes the coming of the Antichrist: he rises from the abyss of Hell in the shape of a fish, which is consequently caught by a man called Judas

Figure 1. Judas returns money to the chief priests and hangs himself. Detail of an 18<sup>th</sup> century miniature.



1 The article was prepared with the support of the program of strategic development of Russian State University for the Humanities.

2 See Baum 1916; Antonov and Mayzuls 2013.

3 Robson 2004, p. 40.

4 The Russian text can be found in: Porfiryev 1890, pp. 231-235. On the legend, see Baum 1916; Sullivan 1998, p. 96; on its representation in Slavic folklore, see Belova 2000, p. 346; Narodnaya Bibliya 2004, p. 337-338.

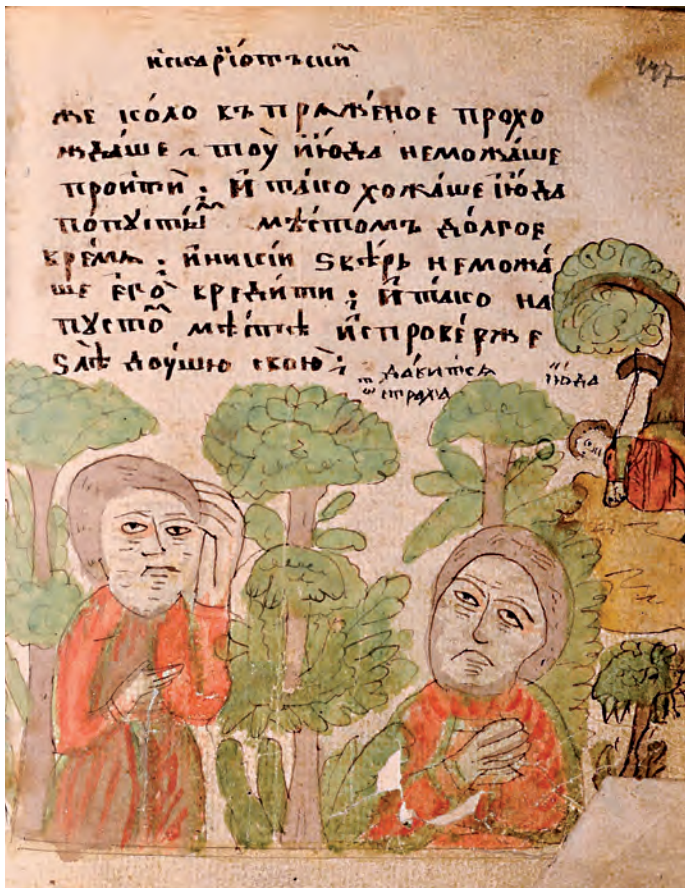


Figure 2. Detail from an 18th century miniature illustrating the apocryphal story with Judas the Betrayer hanging from a tree (at right). The text reads Judas “dumped out his entrails”. Someone else wrote below: “Suffocates himself from fear.”

and sold for 30 pieces of silver. The demonic fish is then eaten by a maiden who is, in this way, impregnated with the Antichrist.<sup>5</sup>

In numerous Mediaeval legends, the life and death of the Traitor are embroidered with copious details (Figure 2). A good example is the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Golden Legend* of Jakobus de Voragine. While the New Testament states shortly that Judas “burst asunder at the midst and all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1:18), the mediaeval story explains the “mechanics” of the event: as the former apostle died, his soul was unable to leave his body through his lips, as usually happens when someone is giving up the ghost, because his throat was constricted by the noose and his lips were “sealed” by the traitorous kiss. As a result, his soul had to escape through his stomach, tearing right through it. European art has many depictions of this scene, as different from Russian.<sup>6</sup>

Many popular beliefs about Judas are also to be found in the folk culture of Europe, Byzantium and Russia. Terrifying details fill the stories of his life, death and posthumous fate. He was born with bad, “evil” physiological traits: red hair, a squint or a lisp. After his betrayal, according to Slavic beliefs, Judas hanged

himself from an aspen, so its leaves tremble to this day; or he wanted to hang himself from a birch, so it blanchied with terror; or, he hanged himself from an alder tree, so its wood turned red. Many legends say that his speedy suicide was not the result of his grief but rather part of an intricate design: he wanted to reach the underworld before Jesus, so that he would be removed from there with all the other sinners as the Savior descended into Hell. But the traitor was too late: he did not manage to get there until after Christ’s Resurrection, and so became the first prisoner of the now depopulated Hell. He sits there together with Satan, holding his money bag, while on earth, tobacco, the damned plant, grows out from his body.<sup>7</sup>

To avoid the misfortune, people in some areas of the Slavic world do not sit down at a table if there are to be thirteen persons at it, or do not pass the salt at table as the Traitor took some salt at the Last Supper. Judas is feared as an evil spirit or an unquiet dead man. Many believe that his soul still wanders the earth, causing disease. Thus he becomes almost a demon himself—actually, in some of the Slavic cultures, forms of his name (such as Juda and Judasz) are used to denote a demon or the Devil, with original folklore characters emerging on this basis as well, such as *triyuda* (lit. “three = many” + “Judas”), *arkhiyuda* (“arch-Judas”) and even *priyudnik* (“Judas’ assistant”, a demon). In Bulgaria,

5 Kniga ob Antikhriste 2007, p. 473–474. Many apocrypha of Byzantine provenance were commonly attributed to the Prophet Daniel.

6 Sullivan 1998, p. 96–97; Depold 2009. Fig. 1, p. 53.

7 For more on these legends and the area they are found in, see Slavyanskije drevnosti 2, p. 430; Belova 2000, p. 344–353; Narodnaya Bibliya 2004, p. 149–150.



*Yuda* is the name of a demoness; in Macedonia, a spirit of wind and gale is called *yuda*.<sup>8</sup> In numerous Slavic folk magic incantations, Judas is presented as a werewolf, a water demon, a demon of the air, and a “lawless devil.” During the Maslenitsa, the carnival preceding Lent, masks of Judas are often used, and mummers dressed as Judas go around villages before Easter. Czechs and Moravians bake special biscuits, shaped as a human figure or a noose, which are supposed to help against snake bites. These are called *judaš*.<sup>9</sup> Even though, as some linguists believe, many of these words are actually derived from *\*juda*, a Slavic stem of Indo-European origin,<sup>10</sup> during the Middle Ages, characters with a name like this would inevitably be associated with the Biblical evildoer demonized in folk culture.<sup>11</sup>

The oldest Russian incantation to include Judas’ name is a 12<sup>th</sup> century inscription from the church of Saint Sophia in Novgorod. According to A. Zaliznyak’s reconstruction, it includes the following address: “the devil Satan, the thieving publican, the lawless Judas... .”<sup>12</sup> There are other examples of the macabre figure of the demonized traitor appearing in various magical texts; for instance, a Siberian book of fortune-telling includes the following passage: “The damned Judas did go forth to the sea and he cast down his hook and he did catch himself a fish called scorpion... .”<sup>13</sup>

The image of Judas as the embodiment of treachery, greed and despair was also used in Russian Baroque culture, serving as a tool of political and social satire. In 1709, after the unexpected betrayal of Mazepa, the Ukrainian Hetman, Peter I ordered a medal to be made depicting the hanged Judas and the thirty pieces of silver, and bearing an inscription: “Thrice damned is Judas, son of perdition, who hangeth himself for greed of money.” This “Order of Judas” was a symbolic replacement for Mazepa’s Order of Saint Andrew, which had been recalled from him. This was not the only time this medal was used: historians say that it was put to further use in the diplomacy and carnivals of Peter’s court.<sup>14</sup> The image of the traitor was even used in the post-1917 period, in spite of the Soviet state’s pronounced anti-religiousness: Leon Trotsky, Boris Pasternak and others were likened to Judas in official propaganda.<sup>15</sup>

### **Judas’ Signs: Halo, Money Bag and Forelock**

The Judas of mediaeval legends and folk beliefs is an ugly creature, a sinner who married his own mother, a son of the Devil, a demon. In the visual arts, the treatment of this character is no less vibrant. He was not painted merely as one of the disciples, in various illustrations of the Gospel. Judas is the protagonist of many other compositions, his figure becoming the center of many new iconographic patterns.

8 Khobzey 2002, p. 73-74.

9 Slavyanskije drevnosti 2, p. 430; Belova 2000, p. 354-360.

10 Khobzey 2002, p. 75.

11 Asked to denote Judas, some people say that he is the Biblical traitor, an evil spirit and an evil man. See, for example, Moroz 2002, p. 253-257, on the basis of studies carried out in Northern Russia.

12 Zaliznyak 2005; Zaliznyak 2006; Agapkina 2010, p. 219-221.

13 Otrechennoye chteniye 2002, p. 65.

14 Zitser 2008, p. 95-105.

15 For more on the demonization of Judas, see Antonov, Mayzuls 2013, p. 191-213.



Figure 3. The terrifying face of Judas, suffering in Hell. 18th century miniature.

Very early depictions of the Traitor are known. His suicide is carved on an Italian bone tablet dated 420-430 AD—the figure of the hanged traitor opposes the figure of the crucified Christ creating the visual opposition of good and bad death.<sup>16</sup> Judas would sometimes be depicted as different from the other apostles, endowed with tokens of sin, such as red hair,<sup>17</sup> or hair standing on end demonically,<sup>18</sup> with a black halo or without one at all.<sup>19</sup> In many compositions, the Devil stands next to him.<sup>20</sup> The torn stomach and the fallen entrails mark both the dreadful death and the dreadful sins of the traitor.

In Russian icons and frescoes, Judas is found fairly often, in the familiar scene of the Last Supper and other scenes from the Gospel: for example, Christ washing the disciples' feet, Judas' kiss and Judas hanged on the tree (sometimes with a demon nearby but never with a torn stomach). As in European art, his figure often looks the same as those of the other apostles, but he can be identified through his gesture: he reaches out to the cup on the table.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes he is fitted out with the various tokens of sin. For instance, following the lead of European art, in some compositions of the *Last Supper* in 18<sup>th</sup> century Russian iconography all apostles except Judas have haloes. An earlier and more frequent sign is a

money bag that the traitor holds in his hand at the Last Supper (though perhaps he had not yet received his payment—only a promise—from the chief priests by the time of the Last Supper and definitely did not bring the money to the table). In mediaeval iconography, this money bag becomes a marker of the Iscariot and appears in various contexts: lying at the feet of the hanged Judas (although, according to the Bible, he returned the money to the chief priests before killing himself),<sup>22</sup> or even accompanying him eternally in Hell as a sign of the un-redeemed sin.

In Russian miniatures that do not directly illustrate the Gospels, Judas often turns into a sort of demon. One of the most impressive examples is found in the miniatures of the 1780s Old Believers manuscript, discovered in the region of the Northern Dvina. There Judas is portrayed twice. On the reverse side of page 447, the reader sees a huge, terrible face, filling up the whole space of the miniature, staring right at him (Figure 3). The skin

16 Schnitzler 2000, p. 103-105, Fig. 1; Murray 2000, p. 327.

17 Pastoureau 2004; Togoëva 2012.

18 On the visual demonization of Judas in European iconography see Murray 2000, p. 323–368; Schnitzler 2000; Weber 2002.

19 See, for example, Fra Beato Angelico's frescoes or the illustrations of the lives of saints by Jakobus de Voragine (Augsburg 1471; reproduced in Makhov 2006, p. 302). For a collection of haloless images of Judas in the frescoes of Assisi, see Robson 2004.

20 Cf. Giotto's frescoes in Capella Scrovegni (Capella dell'Arena) in Padua (14th century). Published in Russell 2001, p. 231.

21 Cf. Matthew 26:23, Mark 14:20, Luke 22:21.

22 Matthew 27:6, Acts 1:19.



Figure 4. Judas stretched on a needle wheel and beaten by demons and sinners in Hell. Detail of an 18th century miniature.

is brown, the face is contorted, the hair stands on end—these are the recurrent markers of the demonic in Russian iconography,<sup>23</sup> making up a horrifying visage. In the next miniature, “Judas the Betrayer” is seen in the arms of his “father,” the Devil.<sup>24</sup>

Some Old Believers manuscripts feature another scene including Judas, which sums up the cycle of infernal torture. These are illustrations to *John’s Vision*, part of the *Velikoe Zercalo* (*Speculum maius*). The visionary sees various torments of Hell, including the terrible torment of Judas Iscariot: in the deepest of abysses, a wheel rapidly turns, to which the ex-apostle is tied. It falls with a tremendous noise into the depths of Hell, and all the demons and sinners start beating the traitor. This scene comes originally from *The Voyage of Saint Brendan*, a cycle of legends composed, presumably, in the later 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> A similar tale, describing the traitor of Christ falling down into the depths of Hell on a fiery wheel, is found in a 12<sup>th</sup> century Cistercian manuscript, and was later reproduced in the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Speculum maius*, composed by the Dominican monk Vincent de Beauvais.<sup>26</sup> This scene is found in many Old Believers manuscripts, which often depict, as a series of separate miniatures or as a long horizontal frieze,

various sinners such as the hard-hearted warrior on a flaming steed, fornicators, a cruel king who is roasted on a spit, sinful monks and nuns being beaten by demons, and, finally, a fragment of the giant wheel where the ex-apostle is tortured (Figure 4).<sup>27</sup>

One of the 18<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts has a long list of infernal scenes with demons inflicting torture on sinners; it ends in a retelling of the same fragment. The miniature shows two demons rolling a large wheel over the flames, a man affixed to it, with the caption: “Judas Iscariot to the wheel is chained and tortured in the bottomless pit, if not for you, the damned one, so would Hell be still.”<sup>28</sup>

### In the Devil’s Lap: Visual Model and its Variations

Outside the context of the Biblical scenes, Russian iconography usually portrays Judas sitting on the knee of the Devil (*in sinu diaboli*). This pattern was used on its own (as in the other miniature from the Northern Dvina collection, see Figure 5), or served as part of a larger composition, such as in *The Last Judgment*, *Descent into Hell*, and *The Fruits of Christ’s Passion*. *The Last Judgment* iconography must have been the original

23 Antonov and Mayzuls 2011, p. 43-72.

24 The library of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Plyushk. № 112. L. 447 rev., 448 rev.

25 See in Makhov 2006, p. 40; Makhov 2007, p. 30. The legend was definitely known in Russia: Cornelius, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century monk from Pskov, refers to it, saying that during his voyage, St. Brendan saw Satan at the bottom of the sea in the shape of a giant serpent (Serebryanskiy 1908, p. 528).

26 *Speculum Historiale*, XXIX, 9 (book: Vincent de Beauvais 1624. P. 1188). See also Pokrovskiy 1887, p. 91 ; Derzhavina 1965, p. 69-70.

27 See in a published cycle of miniatures: Bagdasarov 2010, p. 43–48, ill. XIII. 29–36. In Old Believers manuscripts this image might have been used to polemic ends by the followers of the *Filipovtsy* denomination. Those who supported self-immolation would argue that people who refused to burn themselves would be thus tortured in Hell.

28 Russian State Library. F. 344. № 184. L. 63 rev.





Figure 5. The Devil with a naked figure in his lap. Detail from an 11th century miniature.

source for all the later visual models, since Judas can be found in it, together with the Devil, as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

In both Greek and European iconography, there is a character sitting on the lap of the Devil. In some cases he is, presumably, not Judas but the Antichrist, which would tally with the epithet given to him by Apostle Paul,<sup>29</sup> *the son of perdition*. A well-known example is a 12<sup>th</sup> century miniature depicting Lucifer which comes from Herrad of Landsberg's *Garden of Delights*.<sup>30</sup> The Devil has a naked human figure in his lap, with its arms pressed to its chest, demonstrating no demonic features whatsoever; the caption near its head says, "Antichrist."<sup>31</sup>

The Gospels, however, do not use the epithet exclusively to describe the apocalyptic enemy of the Church; in John 17:12, it denotes Judas. That is why with similar pictorial compositions, when the figure is not marked by a caption or distinguishing features, some experts waiver between the two versions. A well-known late 11<sup>th</sup> century mosaic in the Santa Maria Assunta basilica (Torcello island) shows Hades, or Satan, holding a white-clad figure whose posture copies his own. Some art historians believe that it is the Antichrist, copying the Devil. They found their views in Herrad of Landsberg's famous precedent. Others, taking into account a considerable number of other mediaeval sources, say that this figure is more likely to be Judas.<sup>32</sup>

In all the known Russian compositions, the figure in Satan's lap is Judas (Figure 5). The sign that helps identify him is usually a small white money bag. It refers to the payment he received for his betrayal but also signifies his greed: he holds onto his silver even in Hell. (Such bags are also often carried by the demons of avarice in miniatures depicting the passing of a departed soul through the *mytarstva*—aerial trials of the soul after death.) Often, in both frescoes and miniatures, the figure is captioned.

Russian illuminators would leave the reader in no doubt as to who was suffering in Satan's paws ("Satan, together with Judas the betrayer, in pain for all time"<sup>33</sup>). Describing the way Hell should be depicted in icons of the *Last Judgment*, *Tolkovye Podlunniki*, the manuals for icon-painters prescribed the Devil to be shown holding "Judas, fiery, on his knees."<sup>34</sup> The figure in Satan's lap was, indeed, most often painted red.

This satanic composition obviously resembles the so-called *Paternitas* type of Trinity icons, in which God the Father holds the child Jesus in his lap (with the Holy Ghost present in the shape of a dove above Jesus' head), and is probably rooted not only in the Gospel calling Judas the son of perdition, but also in the various Christian writings

29 2 Thes 2:3.

30 See Gurevich 1989, ill. 64; Makhov 2007, p. 171.

31 The manuscript itself perished in a fire in 1870; however, an early 19th century copy remains.

32 See in more detail in Antonov and Mayzuls 2011, p. 186.

33 Pokrovskiy 1887, p. 91.

34 Buslayev 1910, p. 136 (on the basis of two 18th century copies).





Figure 6. (left and right)  
"Damned Trinity," Model 1:  
Judas sits in the Devil's lap,  
the Devil sits on a Hell-Beast.  
Details from 18th century  
miniatures.

which describe his posthumous fate (for instance, the vision of Gregory from the *Life of St. Basil the New*, which tells about the punishment inflicted on the sinners after the Last Judgment, and mentions the Arians being tortured "in the same place as the Devil is and all his demons and the traitor Judas"<sup>35</sup>).

This visual motif is often used in larger compositions or on its own in manuscripts, illustrating various accounts of infernal torture. Very often, the Devil and Judas are accompanied by a third character, the personified Hell, which sometimes serves to stress the idea that the chief demon and the chief sinner are together incarcerated in the depths of the Inferno. While the figures of these two are fairly uniform and vary but little from manuscript to manuscript, Hell takes on many forms. For example, in many images of the *Last Judgment*, it is depicted as a beast, which Satan rides, holding Judas (Figure 6), so that the body of the beast is his throne.<sup>36</sup>

A very different idea was used in the iconography of the *Fruits of the Christ's Passion* (which emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and became very popular with Old Believers, finding its way into icons and miniatures): there, the Devil sits in Hell's open maw

Figure 7. "Damned Trinity,"  
Model 2: Judas sits in the  
Devil's lap, the Devil is locked  
in a Hell's Mouth. Fragments  
of the *Fruits of the Christ's  
Passion* icon. 18th century.



35 Russian State Library. F. 98. № 375. L. 194 rev.

36 As on a 16th century Northern Russian icon kept in the Hermitage (Inv. №ERI-230; published in Sinay 2000, R-32).





Figure 8. "Damned Trinity," Model 3: Judas sits in the Devil's lap, the Devil sits in a Hell-Giant's lap. Fragment of the *Descent into Hell* icon. Vladimir-Suzdal. 16th century.

(Figure 7), again, holding Judas—with or without his traditional money bag.<sup>37</sup> Here, Hell is not a throne, but a fanged prison for Satan and Judas.

The third version is common for the *Descent into Hell* compositions. A vivid example (Figure 8) can be seen in a late 16th century Vladimir-Suzdal icon, where the characters are aligned almost exactly as the Divine Hypostases in the *Paternitas* icons: a red-skinned giant representing Hell holds in his lap a winged Satan, who in his turn holds in his lap Judas—a small, beardless, naked childlike figure, looking straight at the viewer and holding his money bag, the name Iuda written nearby.<sup>38</sup> (There exist other icons of the *Resurrection* which include this motif.<sup>39</sup>) Here, Hell holds the Devil in his bosom, thus turning from a throne or a prison into his virtual father, and Judas, the son of perdition, becomes the last in this hierarchy, or indeed this Ladder of Infernal Descent—from the huge many-eyed monster to the small naked sinner.<sup>40</sup>

In Old Believers iconography of the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this "Damned Trinity" (or "Anti-Trinity") became a very popular motif. It was included in the illustrations of infernal torture, where the Devil, with Judas in his lap, can be found riding the Beast among the flames, demons and sinners. It was also used as a model for a separate type of

image meant to depict sins: there, a sitting Satan surrounded by demons would hold in the same position not Judas but a small imp representing one of the sins.

The "Anti-Trinity" is a good example of how sacred models are turned upside down, or mirrored, to depict evil. Many features of the visual representation of Hell in mediaeval art were formed this way (such as the Tree of Jesse and its negative reflection, the Tree of Sins, a visual motif, spread in Old Believers miniatures). Apart from the Holy Trinity, the image of Abraham's bosom is a reference point here: Abraham would sometimes be portrayed holding numerous small figures of righteous men in his lap, arms, or in the folds of his clothing, an iconography similar to that of the Devil with Judas.

37 Kuznetsova 2008, № 1–38; Ikony Muroma 2004, № 65.

38 Vladimir-Suzdal Museum. Inv. № B-6300/2755; published in: *Ikony Vladimira i Suzdalya* 2008, p. 282. Cf., for example, in an illustrated early 17th century Bible: State History Museum, Vakh. № 1. L. 914 rev.

39 As, for example, on a late-16th-century icon from Yaroslavl in: Yaroslavl Art Museum, Inv. № I-1754, KP-21119; published in *Ikony Yaroslavlya* 2009. № 83, p. 454–459.

40 See also a late but vivid example from an 1820s Old Believers manuscript, including a large foldout page with a huge miniature depicting Hell. The Devil, surrounded by demons, presides over a large flaming "rose," with the sinners' heads poking out from inside it. In Satan's lap is Judas, with a bag of silver coins. See: Archives of the Pushkin House (the Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences). The Northern Dvina collection, № 152. L. 82.



Figure 8. Evolution of the “Damned Trinity” visual motif (model 1): The Devil sits on a chair, his “favorite” sin—lust—sits in his lap. Fragment of an 18th century miniature.

This was repeated thrice, and, as a result, Judas was left where he was—exactly where he is depicted in various icons, frescoes and miniatures.<sup>46</sup>

41 See, for example, in an Old Believers Tale of a Man named Timofey (1680s): Pigin 2006, p. 252. On the Tale itself, see pp. 208–217.

42 Pamyatniki 1909, p. 166.

43 Slavyanskije drevnosti 2, p. 430; Narodnaya Bibliya 2004, p. 346, 308, 402.

44 This belief is found with the Lemkos in Western Ukraine, Poland and Slovakia. See in: Belova 2000, p. 345; Narodnaya Bibliya 2004, p. 337.

45 Narodnaya Bibliya 2004, p. 402.

46 Narodnaya Bibliya 2004, p. 308; Slavyanskije drevnosti 2, p. 430.

The visual model of the “Anti-Trinity” also influenced literature and folklore. Not only stories of visionaries,<sup>41</sup> but even the most unexpected texts, such as the early 17<sup>th</sup> century *Tale of How Boris Godunov Stole the Moscow Throne With Iniquity*, written soon after Vasily IV’s coming to power, mention Judas sitting *in sinu diaboli*. In the passage describing the demonized False Dmitry (the enthroned and later killed pretender), the writer condemns the pride of the self-called tsar and says that this heretic wanted to be above Satan himself in the depths of Hell, and coveted the place of Judas in the bosom of the Devil.<sup>42</sup>

Stories about Judas on the knees of the Devil are as well spread in Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian folklore, often with remarkable details.<sup>43</sup> For example, some legends claim that Judas was dandled on the knee of Satan even as a child,<sup>44</sup> or that all self-murderers are to be found there; or that the Devil’s lap is the location where all the sinners who haven’t been forgiven by God are kept.<sup>45</sup> There is also a special legend which explains, if not why Judas is to be found in such an unusual place, then at least why he did not leave Hell after the Resurrection. It says that as the Savior was taking sinners out of Hell, He asked Judas whether he was comfortable, and the Devil started prodding the ex-apostle’s sides, urging him to answer in the positive.

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