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RETHINKING THE ROLE OF STYLE IN ORTHODOX ICONOGRAPHY:

THE INVENTION OF TRADITION IN THE WRITINGS OF FLORENSKY, OUSPENSKY AND KONTOGLOU

The twentieth century witnessed a twofold transformation of the icon within the Orthodox Church. Outwardly, the appearance of the icon changed as many iconographers abandoned stylistic naturalism that was common in previous centuries and instead began imitating less naturalistic styles from Byzantium and mediaeval Russia.¹ At the same time, a new genre of Orthodox literature emerged, claiming to present traditional teaching on icons, and offering ideological justification for this new stylistic traditionalism.² This new genre of icon theology – exemplified by the writings of Pavel Florensky, Leonid Ouspensky and Photios Kontoglou – transformed the meaning of icons within the Orthodox Church by defining them primarily in stylistic terms. These writers attacked naturalism in icons for being both carnal and Western, while they praised non-naturalistic Byzantine and Russian styles for their spirituality. For the first time in the history of the Church, style was treated as the primary criterion of orthodoxy in icons.

Many within Church circles still regard the traditionalist writings of Florensky, Ouspensky and Kontoglou as authoritative even today. The theology and meaning of the Orthodox icon is still frequently reduced to a non-naturalistic style, which is equated with spirituality. But does the history of Ortho-

1 My research for this paper began with my Master of Divinity thesis at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, which was submitted in 2009. I wish to thank my advisor, Prof. Richard Schneider, as well as Fr John Behr and Fr Alexander Rentel for their support of my research. I am also grateful for the feedback I received on an earlier version of this paper from participants in the 2013 ISOCM conference, "Church Music and Icons: Windows to Heaven." Iconographers such as Leonid Ouspensky, Photios Kontoglou, and the Monk Gregory Kroug exemplify this artistic trend.

2 E.g., in *Theology of the Icon*, Leonid Ouspensky notes that icons had already been studied by scholars "from the historical, aesthetic, sociological, and archaeological points of view," and proposes instead to answer the question, "What does the Church itself think of the art which it has created? What are its teachings on this subject?" Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, tr. Anthony Gythiel and Elizabeth Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), 7; cf. Kari Kotkavaara, *Progeny of the Icon: Émigré Russian Revivalism and the Vicissitudes of the Eastern Orthodox Sacred Image* (Åbo, Finland: Åbo Akademi University Press, 1999), 3-4.

dox iconography justify this stylistic interpretation? Do icons themselves support the style-based iconologies of Florensky, Ouspensky and Kontoglou, which claim the authority of Church tradition? As Eric Hobsbawm famously observed, “‘Traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented.”³ This paper argues that neither the history of Orthodox iconography nor Byzantine writings support the dichotomies of naturalism vs. non-naturalism and carnality vs. spirituality in icons. The modern definition of the icon in terms of non-naturalistic style is in fact foreign to the history of Orthodox iconography, owing its origin to aesthetic tastes and art historical writings of the modern period.

THE “REDISCOVERY” OF THE ICON

Within the Orthodox Church, artists such as Ouspensky and Kontoglou are often credited with the revival of “traditional” iconography in the modern era. But the so-called “rediscovery of the icon” in the modern period hardly began with traditionalist painters like Ouspensky and Kontoglou. In fact, the broad popularity of Byzantine and early Russian icons in the modern era had little to do with the Church at all. Modern interest in “traditional” icons undoubtedly began in nineteenth century Russia, when Romanticism and nationalism inspired a new curiosity about the past and a quest for distinctly Russian cultural forms.⁴ The “rediscovery” of the icon gained momentum by the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries when new art restoration techniques allowed older icons to be uncovered for the first time. Conservators like Alexander Anisimov developed new restoration techniques to remove soot, darkened varnish and layers of overpainting that had accumulated on icons from centuries of liturgical and devotional use.⁵ Restorers removed metal and jewelled icon covers (called *riza* or *oklad*) and stripped icons down to their earliest layers of paint. For example, icons like Andrei Rublev’s *Old Testament Trinity* and the *Virgin of Vladimir*, which are often regarded as masterpieces of Russian and Byzantine iconography today, had been hidden for centuries before they were restored in 1904 and 1918 respectively.⁶

3 Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

4 Kotkavaara, 34-35, 124-155; 14-16; Elena Boeck, “Strength in Numbers or Unity in Diversity?: Compilations of Miracle-Working Virgin Icons,” in *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, ed. Jefferson J. A. Gatrall and Douglas Greenfield (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 39-41.

5 Shirley A. Glade, “Anisimov and the Rediscovery of Old Russian Icons,” in *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, ed. Jefferson J. A. Gatrall and Douglas Greenfield (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 89-111; cf. Kotkavaara, 160-170.

6 Jefferson J. A. Gatrall, “Introduction,” in *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, ed. Jefferson J. A. Gatrall and Douglas Greenfield (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 4; Glade, 96-97.