

The Experience of Iconicity: A Meditation on St. Andrei Rublev's *Trinity* Icon

Holy Week 2023

*"We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion"*
T.S. Eliot¹

Introductory Remarks

In 2012, I had the opportunity to visit the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. I knew of Andrei Rublev's famous *Trinity* icon but had never really paid much attention to it until I beheld its beauty in the Rublev room. It moved me in a way that has stuck with me for eleven years until now. It is my favorite icon (I also viewed my favorite painting – *The Philosophers* – by Mikhail Nesterov in the adjacent room).² This essay is a synthesis of that experience and the years that followed: call it a meditation that has been forming in my heart for quite some time; a *metanoia* of iconicity, Trinity, and beauty. In taking Bishop Maxim Vasiljević's class on *Theology, Economy, and Liturgy*, it has become quite evident in the research and reflection for this paper that something moved me profoundly that day I beheld the eternal beauty of Rublev's *Trinity* and its captivation had seized me. This meditation essay reflects and synthesizes into words that experience, coupled with theological musings related to this famous 15th century Russian icon of the Holy Trinity.

The quote above from *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot (another favorite of mine), speaks to this *experience of iconicity*. Eliot had a way with words in like manner Rublev had a way with colors: both make use of an artistic medium to speak to eternal truths based in spiritual experience. I choose this line from my favorite poem because it sums up what an *experience of iconicity* is: a synchronous encounter of stillness (*hesychia*), movement (*perichoresis*), communion (*koinonia*), intensity (*eros*), and union (*theosis*). My Greek translation may be a little off, but the spirit of connection between Eliot's English and their Greek Patristic counterpart is probably close enough to convey this truth. Hopefully my essay below shows enough coherence in this *experience of iconicity* in reference to Rublev's *Trinity*. So here we go...

¹ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, page 32.

² My opinion: they were discussing Sergius Bulgakov's vocation to become ordained in the Russian Orthodox Church. In the painting you can see St. Pavel Florensky wearing a white cassock while Bulgakov is wearing his usual three pieced suit – a sign that he had not been ordained. The look on Bulgakov's face is serious, downcast, intense, while the gaze on Florensky's is also downcast, but soft, pensive, and reflective. Bulgakov ended up becoming ordained as a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church and living out the rest of his life as in emigree in Paris, while Florensky met a martyr's end under Soviet rule in 1937 not far from St. Petersburg after being exiled in the Solovki gulag. I consider Florensky to be a saint for this reason; hence why I refer to him reverentially as St. Pavel Florensky. See appendix.

An Icon is Not an Image

Icons have always been an important expression of Orthodox tradition. The iconoclast movement of the 8th and 9th centuries demonstrated, under great strain, icons are not only an important expression of this tradition, but are eternal – they cannot be suppressed, for in their suppression one sees in history that trying to do away with icons only creates avenues for which greater iconic expression is possible – to create new possibilities of creative iconic articulation. The reason for this is that icons are *eschatological* – they point to that paradox of *now, but not yet*. John Zizioulas writes that “iconographical language emerges after truth becomes identified with communion. Eikon is the final truth of being communicated in and through the event of communion (liturgical or sacramental), anticipating the ‘end’ of history from within its unfolding.”³ Iconicity is bound with eternity, eschatology, in who’s expression cannot be pinned down to a certain historical event – no matter how hard history tries to suppress or articulate their truth. To use the words of Stamatis Skliris, in writing on Rublev’s *Trinity*, “this takes us back to his treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity in the icon of the Holy Trinity. Historical action has ceased, the tragedy of life on earth has been overcome, the Spirit has fulfilled its role, and peace of the life to come reigns supreme.”⁴

I argue that icons are needed now more than ever. The apparent paradox of this sad situation in the 21st century lies in the obvious fact that our age is overloaded – utterly saturated - with images, but underloaded and almost absent of icons (apart from within the tradition of the Orthodox Church). The confusion is thus: an icon is not an image. To the Western eye, an icon is an image. We have become confused on the image/icon distinction that we’ve lost the ability to even begin to see the difference. Bishop Maxim Vasiljević notes that “in a society obsessed with multimedia illusions, where visual pollution of every kind has obscured our real capacity to see, it is difficult to witness a true icon.”⁵ This is why seeing icons, or rather experiencing them, are not on par with seeing mere images, but are rather the basis of a coherent, spiritual experience, which the Orthodox Church has confessed throughout the centuries. It is this spiritual event I beheld at the Tretyakov gallery in 2012 that has stuck with me – I didn’t just see an *image* of the Holy Trinity, I felt the basis of a spiritual experience that St. Andrei Rublev intuitively grasped in the 15th century that has lived on to countless people who have had similar encounters with the divine truth contained within his icon of the Holy Trinity. As St. Florensky writes “all icons possess in themselves the power of spiritual revelation, through some veil it almost impenetrably.”⁶ Furthermore, he reminds us that “the basis of every icon is a spiritual experience.”⁷

To reflect on the contemporary digital image, one can hardly conclude that the basis of every image is a spiritual experience. Far from it, a contemporary image, in contrast to an icon,

³ John Zizioulas, *Being and Communion*, page 101.

⁴ Stamatis Skliris, *In The Mirror*, page 201.

⁵ Maxim Vasiljević, *Theology as a Surprise*, page 213.

⁶ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, page 72.

⁷ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, page 75.

screams “look at me!”⁸ Therein lies the distinction between image and icon – the contemporary digital image is self-referential, demands your attention, and points to nothing but itself. An icon points, humbly and calmly, to the mystical reality beyond it; an eschatological symbol; “the symbol is the symbolized.”⁹ In the case of Rublev’s *Trinity* the *image* is that of the three angels in Genesis 18, but the *symbol* – the icon itself – is that of the Holy Trinity. It points to the reality of God as Trinity, humbly, quietly, serenely, without boast.¹⁰

An Icon is a Relationship

The late, great Metropolitan John Zizioulas, of blessed memory, wrote in his *magnum opus*, *Being and Communion* that:

as is known, the final formulation of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity speaks of ‘one substance, three persons’. One would therefore have said that the unity of God, the ‘ontology’ of God, consists in the substance of God. This would bring us back to the ancient Greek ontology: God first is God (His substance or nature, His being), and then exists as Trinity, that is, as persons. This interpretation in fact prevailed in Western theology and unfortunately entered into modern Orthodox dogmatics with the arrangement in the dogmatic handbook of the headings ‘On the One God’ followed by ‘On the Trinity’. The significance of this interpretation lies in the assumption that the ontological ‘principle’ of God is not found in the person but in the substance, that is, in the ‘being’ itself of God. Indeed the idea took shape in Western theology that that which constitutes the unity of God is the one divine substance, the one divinity; this is, as it were, the ontological ‘principle’ of God.¹¹

This paragraph (forgive me for its length) is of paramount importance in the understanding of the Holy Trinity as one of relationship. God – in the Western understanding – is a substance (essence) first – but God as Trinity – in the Eastern understanding – is a relationship first. The importance of Zizioulas’s insight is that if one puts God’s nature first and his relationship second, is tantamount to misunderstanding God; an ordinal, if not, dogmatic error. Rather, priority should be given first to God as Trinity – the relationship of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity – then, afterward, dwell on the ontological issue. The same ordinal principle (personhood first, ontology second) applies to iconography, and especially iconography of the Holy Trinity. To put it bluntly: an icon is a relationship. If it were a substance/essence, devoid of the potential

⁸ “‘Look at me!’ – the claim of the digital image, which renders itself entirely obvious – is a rejection of the *iconic ontology* that automatically results in a different understanding of human existence” from Maxim Vasiljević, *Theology as a Surprise*, page 222.

⁹ “The idea that the visual image is a symbol in the sense that it ‘contains’ the presence of the depicted being or figure. The symbol is the symbolized. Thus, the icon of Christ (immanent) is Christ (transcendent) in a manner defined by the Byzantine iconophile theologians of the eighth and ninth centuries” in Clemena Antonova, *Visual Thought in Russian Religious Philosophy*, page 22.

¹⁰ “Without a deeply rooted humility, a complete renunciation of all worldly ambition before the sublimity of the mystery that he served as a painter, Rublev would never have been able to paint his *Trinity*” in Gabriel Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity*, page 88.

¹¹ John Zizioulas, *Being and Communion*, page 40.

for relationship, it would cease to be an icon, because of the relational nature of God and thus of the icon; “if God does not exist, the person does not exist”.¹² Taken further, in famous words from St. Florensky himself on Rublev’s *Trinity* icon: “there exists the icon of the Holy Trinity by St. Andrei Rublev; therefore, God exists.”¹³ An appeal to the iconicity of God’s existence – a very Eastern Orthodox approach to say the least; a far cry from the Western proofs and logical deductions for God’s existence, which I find so boring and uninspiring.

This relationship between the icon and the believer is hypostatic; it is personal as well as relational.¹⁴ This is because of God’s relationship between the three Persons of the Holy Trinity are relational too – a point that has been driven home by plenty of Eastern Orthodox theologians from Irenaeus of Lyons in the 2nd century to John Zizioulas in the 21st century and which to repeat here would be mere copy-paste and frankly nauseating. Let us return to the icon at hand...

Looking at the *Trinity* icon, one sees the relational nature of the image of the three angels. Although the account of the image is taken from Genesis 18 – the so-called Hospitality of Abraham – the three angels are a foreshadowing of the revelation of the Holy Trinity, as fulfilled at Pentecost in Acts 2:1-31.¹⁵ The late British Orthodox theologian Metropolitan Kallistos Ware points out very succinctly that “the meaning of God as Trinity and of the human person as Trinitarian is summed up in Andrei Rublev’s icon...each of the three faces the other, each is a *prosopon*, a person or a face, in relation to the remaining two. They are engaged in dialogue.”¹⁶ Seated around a table, with a chalice placed in the middle, the angels appear not only if in dialogue, but resemble being at a meal and enjoying each other’s company – not without its obvious eucharistic/liturgical overtones to the discerning Eastern eye.

Gabriel Bunge, a former Benedictine-turned-Orthodox monk, beautifully illustrates in his book *The Rublev Trinity* that “Rublev’s brilliant achievement, therefore, consists in having created an icon, which for the first time not only depicts the three divine hypostases, but also manifests each of them in their unchangeable uniqueness as persons, that is, in their relationship to the other persons, insofar, as this is known in their individual activity in the history of salvation...Florensky had already grasped this intuitively when he designated Rublev as the real creator of an icon of the Holy Trinity.”¹⁷ The brilliance of Rublev goes beyond the depiction of three angels, the angels depict each unique hypostasis of the Holy Trinity, hence the obvious title of the icon *Trinity*.

¹² “If God does not exist, the person does not exist...humanism proves unable to affirm personhood” in John Zizioulas’s *Being and Communion*, page 43. One of my favorite lines of all Zizioulas’s writings.

¹³ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, page 68.

¹⁴ “The icon is a hypostatic presence to which one can relate, which is at the same time *transcendent*...this encounter with the divine, in paradox and ambiguity, is a matter of *relation* rather than logical argumentation” from Maxim Vasiljević, *Theology as a Surprise*, page 206.

¹⁵ “The Byzantine patristic tradition recognizes three stages in God’s postlapsarian relation to man. The first is depicted in the Old Testament and is characterized by symbol and shadow, as well as being a symbolic prefiguration of the ‘things to come’. The second stage is embodied in the New Testament, which is characterized by image. Here we have the ‘true form (icon) of these realities’. The third stage of this relationship will, of course, be in the kingdom of God to come, in which we will see the reality ‘face to face’” from Anita Strezova, *Mystery of the Triune God in Iconophile Apologia*, page 200.

¹⁶ Kallistos Ware, *The human person as an icon of the Trinity*, page 18.

¹⁷ Gabriel Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity*, page 105-106.

Concluding Remarks

To be completely candid, there is so much more I want to write about Rublev's *Trinity*. More could be written about its history¹⁸, its Palamite hermeneutics¹⁹, its impact on later Byzantine and Russian iconography²⁰, the apophatic vs cataphatic expression²¹...the list goes on. To continue much further I fear would take away from the beauty of the icon itself and the experience, the encounter, the manifestation of the Triune God in complete, perfect iconistic expression. This is what I have attempted to convey in this essay without getting too far unbalanced on either side: a concern for the aesthetic nature and history on one end, or the dogmatic expression the other end. I have attempted to find a balance that is based in experience, beauty, and dogma.

As stated in my Introductory Remarks, the inspiration of this essay was initially based on my first-hand encounter of Rublev's icon in person. There is something important in this initial discovery. It took a journey all the way to Moscow to be able to have this original spiritual experience. This could not have been possible (in my opinion) seeing the icon digitally on a screen.²² The main argument of this essay – that icons are not images, they are relationships – and relationships take work. Relationships require both persons to show up, be present, attuned, in dialogue with each other. The perfect expression of this is Rublev's *Trinity* – in the three persons depicted, but also in the believer standing within this gathering – in humble prayer, awe, and reverence. Such, I believe, was the intent of St. Andrei Rublev in creating this masterpiece.

Bibliography

- Antonova, Clemena. 2020. *Visual Thought in Russian Religious Philosophy: Pavel Florensky's Theory of the Icon*. New York: Routledge.
- Bunge, Gabriel. 2007. *The Rublev Trinity*. Edited by Andrew Louth. Yonkers, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Eliot, T.S. 1943. *Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt.
- Florensky, Pavel. 1996. *Iconostasis*. Edited by Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev. Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Skiris, Stamatis. 2007. *In The Mirror: A Collection of Iconographic Essays and Illustrations*. Edited by Maxim Vasiljević and St Herman of Alaska Monastery. Alhambra, CA: Western American Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church.
- Strezova, Anita. 2012. "Mystery of the Triune God in Iconophile Apologia." *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 57 (1-4): 175-212.
- Vasiljević, Maxim. 2018. *Theology as a Surprise*. Yonkers, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Ware, Kallistos. 1986. "The human person as an icon of the Trinity." *Sobornost* 8 (2): 6-23.
- Zizioulas, John D. 1985. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.

¹⁸ See Gabriel Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity*, pages 23-44.

¹⁹ See Clemena Antonova, *Visual Thought in Russian Religious Philosophy*, pages 22-35

²⁰ See Stamatis Skiris, *In The Mirror*, pages 195-204.

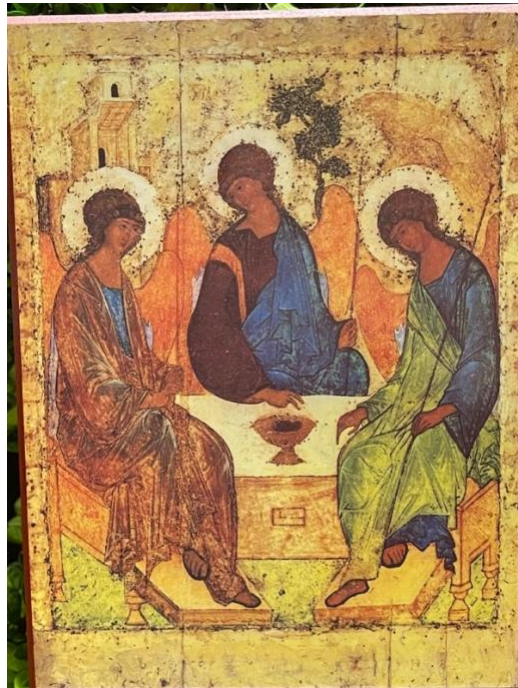
²¹ See Anita Strezova, *Mystery of the Triune God in Iconophile Apologia*, pages 175-212

²² Which gives more credence, I believe, to Bishop Maxim's main argument in *On Digital Iconicity*, in *Theology as a Surprise*, pages 213-224.

Appendix



Moscow 2012: the author at the Tretyakov Gallery in front of Mikhail Nesterov's
The Philosophers



USA 2023: Rublev's *Trinity* (from my home iconostasis)