THE FRESH AIR OF TRADITION:

In Praise of Dogma, Goodness and Tradition

by
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As an icon painter and carver for over thirty-five years I am often asked if I find to work within a tradition stifles creativity. My reply invariably is that it does not. The icon tradition sets such a high objective for itself that for an iconographer to do it any justice strains every fibre of his or her being, both spiritually and creatively. Icons depict God made man, humans deified, and material creation transfigured (fig 1). To fulfil this task worthily is impossible, but it is what we strain toward.

Because the provenance and date of icons can be determined by their style alone, it is also clear that while the content of icons is timeless, the form of icons varies from epoch to epoch, even from iconographer to iconographer (fig. 2a and 2b). This shows that faithfulness to the icon tradition is to live and transmit that tradition, not merely to copy. The icon tradition is therefore both timeless and incarnate in time.

This question about tradition and creativity has led me to think more broadly about why people have asked the question in the first place. What has led them to associate tradition with restriction and not inspiration, and dogma with narrowness? This short essay considers how the power of sacred tradition in icons, and objective truth expressed in Christian dogma, can be explained to a modern age that equates vigour with constant change, originality with novelty, tradition with suffocation.

Let me consider the subject of written dogma first, and then pass onto the visual tradition of the icon. As we shall discuss, the icon exists within the larger symphony of hymnography; that is, theology sung as praise. The icon’s home is in church, in prayer corners in homes, as well as in roadside shrines (fig. 3). It exists alongside the word and both interprets it and is interpreted by it, so the relationship of image and dogma is intimate.

In praise of dogma

Many say dogma is the sword of inquisitions, that it incites wars and closes minds. But doctrines became swords and prisons to the mind only when they compromise paradox. True dogma affirms the reality of paradox against the closed and zealot mind.

The heretic Arius could not comprehend how Christ could be both human and the uncreated and everlasting Son of God, so he devised a compromise doctrine declaring that there was a time when the Son was not. But Christian dogma declares the impossible, that Christ is both the beginningless God and man, fully divine, fully human. It keeps the paradox and lives happily with the incomprehensible. Instead of limiting the horizon, such dogma keeps people in a

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1 Adapted from Aidan Hart, Beauty Spirit Matter (Leominster: Gracewing Publications, 2014) pages 33-40.
2 In a letter to the Arian bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia he stated his belief: ‘[The Son] has subsisted before time and before ages as perfect as God, only begotten and unchangeable, and that before he was begotten, or created, or purposed, or established, he was not.’ From Theodoret: ‘Arius's Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia’, transl. E. Peters, in Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), p. 41
state of wonder. This tension between seeming opposites is of course also true of expressions within many other great belief systems, the Zen Buddhist koan being one example.

Such religious dogmas are a hymn to the glory of the ineffable God, not a filing cabinet of definitions. Those who do not experience the living God prefer to reduce Him to a convenient definition, or to deny His existence outright. It is such limitations of glory and not glorious dogmas that create wars. Zealots execute and imprison not because their victims disagree with God, but because their victims disagree with them.

Throughout history, saints have only theologized in response to theories that try to bottle the heavens within the skull, that try to reduce paradox to a triviality. Church doctrine is a response to falsehood and not an attempt to describe the ineffable. And when the saints do dogmatize they do so reluctantly, preferring the silence of awe to the noise of words. The seventh-century St Isaac the Syrian wrote that ‘true wisdom is gazing at God. Gazing at God is silence of the thoughts’ (Homily 64). In Homily 65 he wrote that ‘silence is a mystery of the age to come, but words are instruments of this world’.

Apophatic theology

When the saints do have to write theology they usually prefer to say what God is not rather than what He is, an approach specialists call apophatic theology. The theologizing saints see the need to balance any positive descriptions of God (cataphatic theology) with negative descriptions. God is certainly love, but He is also beyond our limited concepts of love. When we say that God is infinite, all we are saying is that He is not finite (an apophatic statement). In this statement no attempt is being made to define the nature of this non-finiteness, which is beyond human comprehension, but only to affirm that He is not limited.

Why is this apophatic approach preferred? A natural love of comfort and of the familiar tempts humans to see God in their own image rather than them in His. The fearful person prefers to keep God indoors than go outdoors with Him. If the Genesis creation account is anything to go by, it seems that God's preferred mode of communion is to walk with us around Paradise and surprise us with its vistas. Christ is a shepherd of sheep on the hills and not a keeper of creatures in zoos.

Apophatic theology allows for the otherness of God by its negative descriptions. This otherness is essential for a real relationship with the living God. There is a danger that prayer ends up being addressed to the person praying because they see God as just a bigger version of themselves. But God as God is entirely other. He is certainly knowable because He loves us, comes to us and reveals Himself to us. At the same time He remains utterly other according to His divine nature. True dogma protects for us the freedom of God to be who He is rather than who we want Him to be.

The most forceful expression of apophatic theology is to say that God does not exist, because He is beyond being. He does exist in that He is, but He does not exist as a being, as an object, a sort of superhuman. The ninth-century Irish theologian John Scotus Eriugena, for all his heterodox teachings, was surely correct when he famously wrote: 'Literally God is not, because He transcends being'.

Icons and faces

It is because God is to be known and loved rather than known about that icons are so important to the life and worship of the Orthodox Church. An icon is above all
else an image of a person. It is not an explanation of a philosophical or a religious system, but is Christ and the saints inviting the viewer into a relationship. It is like a door through which one can pass to meet the saintly person that it depicts. This is why Orthodox Christians kiss icons. They are not so much kissing the icon as greeting and venerating the person depicted in the icon (fig. 4). Icons are not for them a work art but a means of communion.

The role of the icon as means of communion also explains why the final thing that an icon painter does to complete an icon is to write on it the name of the subject. It is this name that above all else makes the picture a holy icon, for it completes the work of image making. This icon is no longer a picture of a person in general, but of a particular person who can be known and loved.

While this naming affirms the possibility of relationship, it does not compromise the mystery of the other. It preserves both the knowability and the apophatic otherness of God and His people. This combination of knowing and unknowing is illustrated by the two names one often finds on icons of Christ.

Icons of Christ will always have His name ‘Jesus Christ’ written somewhere on the background (usually in the abbreviated Greek form, IC XC). Jesus (Saviour) is the name He was known by on earth. It is His human name. Christ means that He is anointed (fig. 5).

Besides this human name, many icons of Christ also have written within His halo the Greek words Ο ὨΝ. As we shall see below, this is one of His names as God, the Greek translation for Jehovah. Although this name is cataphatic – a positive description of God’s existence – it also has apophatic inferences. As such, the icon’s combination of Christ’s earthly name, Jesus Christ, with His divine name, Ο ὨΝ, unites the incarnation with the ineffableness of God. The Man we are looking at in the icon is also the ineffable Lord, beyond all comprehension.

The two words Ο ὨΝ are taken from the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, in particular from Exodus 13 that describes God’s revelation of Himself to Moses through the burning bush. When Moses asked God how he ought to reply when the Israelites asked who had sent him, God replied to tell them: ‘I am Ο ὨΝ. Thus shall you say to the children of Israel, Ο ὨΝ has sent me to you’ (Ex. 3:14). The original Hebrew passage is often translated as: ‘I AM WHO I AM. Thus shall you say to the children of Israel, I AM has sent me to you’.

In its Biblical context the two Greek words Ο ὨΝ can be translated as ‘The Existing One’ or ‘The Being’ or ‘He Who Is’. The point being made in both the Hebrew and its Greek translation is that God does not have, but is. He does not have life or existence or being but is life, existence and being. He is self-existent. Although we can learn something about Him from His reflections in the created realm – God is like this or like that – He is also infinitely beyond these reflections of Himself. He is Himself the Life that we see in, as it were, the mere two dimensions of the reflection.

In this sense, I AM Ο ὨΝ is a cataphatic statement with apophatic force. It is cataphatic because a positive divine self-description, and apophatic because it overwhelms – by transcendence – limited human conception of what is personal, or to use the Greek term hypostatic, existence.

However, while acknowledging the otherness of the divine nature from created nature, the main emphasis of the icon and of orthodox dogma is that God is the loving God who enters relationship with His people. The point being made by the icon’s use of the divine name written very close to Christ’s very face is that this divine infinitude and incomprehensibility is now inviting us into a relationship. He is
looking at us. He has become flesh and blood and thereby taken humanity up into divinity in a union without confusion. He now has a face.

This incarnational context for the divine name Ὁ ὬΝ is confirmed by the fact that it is written within a cross set within the halo, the cross upon which the incarnate Lord was crucified.

**Dogma as doxology**

Such a primacy of relationship over knowledge also explains why all the traditional creeds of the Church are hymns as well as formulae. They are dogma expressed as doxology. The creeds were above all else made to be said or sung as part of worship. The words dogma and doxology are in fact etymological cousins.

Our English word dogma has its roots in the Greek word dokein, meaning ‘to seem good, to think’. When a person’s opinions about divine things align with what is true then his or her opinions become a form of dogma and doxology. The Christian Creed begins with the words: ‘I believe in one God’. The Creed therefore describes a relationship between humans and God, and above all describes the wondrous things that God has done for His people. This is why the Creed is designed to be said or sung within divine worship.

The Creed is sometimes also called the Symbol of Faith. Whilst written with the precision of a scientific paper, it is also a work of poetry, a symbol or token of something much greater than itself. It is an outline sketch of God’s trinitarian nature and of His works for humankind. It evokes as much as it defines. It is a type of icon, and as such is both like and unlike the One Whom it describes.

When we read positive descriptions of God and His works, such as we find in the Nicene Creed, these must be understood as analogical, as rising from the lesser to the greater. When the Creed declares that Christ is Light of Light, the Christian needs to be mindful that created light is just a little bit like divine Light and not the other way around. Divine Light existed before all ages and therefore before temporal light was created. To use mathematical imagery, God is Light is the superset, and created light is the subset (although in this case, the superset has no boundary).

This likeness and unlikeness helps explain why icons use a somewhat flattened perspective. On the one hand an icon is linked to its subject through sharing his or her likeness and name. On the other hand, the icon also reminds us that it is not that person but just a flat surface of paint on wood. It shares identity with the subject through sharing his or her likeness, but it is also not that subject since it does not share the subject’s nature. It is wood and paint while its subject is flesh and blood.

**Dogma and the icon**

If all the above is true, then it is easier to answer the charge sometimes levelled against the icon tradition, that its adherence to dogma and tradition must deprive its art of life and vigour. Does the future lie with the ever changing art of the galleries, and should we therefore introduce the spirit of modernity into church iconography?

While there is an important place for the experimentation and independence provided by gallery art, the aim of liturgical art is different and cannot be judged by gallery art’s criteria. The latter is more the realm of speculative philosophy, whilst liturgical art is the realm of revelation. Constant change will be the inevitable result of fine art’s experimentation, questing and philosophical enquiry. There is of course overlap between the icon and fine art because both are concerned with colour artistically applied to surfaces, but because their aims differ their forms will differ.
As we have discussed, when dogma is true it opens vistas and does not close them. The views seen will be of the same divine reality, and so we should expect continuity. Which is precisely what we find in iconography: continuity of content.

However, different people and different cultures see the same scene differently and so we should also expect variety, which is precisely what we also find in iconography. This also explains why there is more than one Gospel account. Each of the four Evangelists addressed a different readership and arranged their material accordingly, emphasising different things for the sake of their particular audience.

Variety within the icon tradition and doctrine has another source apart from cultural variety or pastoral need. The Paradise of God’s love is infinite in scope, and so we should expect to find variation through time as people discover new depths. This is not a variation in width but one of depth or height. One insight does not contradict the one before, but enters it more deeply. As St Paul wrote to the Corinthians: ‘And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.’3 Change here is not from bad to good, but from good to even better, ‘from one degree of glory to another’.

There is an apophatic dynamic to this progress ever deeper and transcendent. For example, God reveals to us that He is love. The next revelation shows us that while He is certainly a loving God and that some characteristics of this divine love are mirrored in human love, His love also transcends any of these experiences. It both includes and transcends our experience of human love.

God will sometimes do or say things that seem completely incomprehensible, yet these things later reveal themselves to be sublime in their wisdom. Before His death and resurrection Christ taught in the synagogue that: ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.’ Naturally, this created consternation among many of the listeners: When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” (John 6:53,60). But later it becomes the central mystery of the Christian faith in the form of the Eucharist.

St Gregory of Nyssa in his Life of Moses4 asserts that this progress from splendour to splendour continues in the age to come, his doctrine of epektasis or eternal progress. This is a passage from one degree of fullness to another greater degree of fullness, a passage that continues throughout eternity. It is a journey of a finite being entering every more deeply into the infinite ocean of God’s personal love. St Gregory’s vision of heaven is dynamic and not static.

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In the human realm, this is not to say that change is necessarily development, a move forward. Change can be a sign of decay, of decadence, of entropy. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia, for example, was a period of decadence and decline for iconography. Peter the Great’s programme of secularising Russia also led to increasing scholasticism in its church’s theology, in which an arid rationalism tended to replace paradox. Icons became cluttered with symbols and didactic references, which compromised their directness as a temenos of encounter with the saints depicted. Through the influence of Italian Baroque, sentimentality also influenced Russian iconography and liturgical music. Greek iconography under Ottoman rule for its part became somewhat simplistic and crude in its folkish quality.

3 2 Cor. 3:18
It was only in the early twentieth century that these two strands of the icon tradition began to rediscover their authentic roots.

**Freedom, ascetism, and the icon**

Apophatic descriptions have an approximate parallel in morality. God's guidance to Adam in Eden was, if you will excuse the paraphrase: ‘Eat whatever you like except for the fruit from that one tree over there’. There is more freedom in being told what not to do than what to do. I prefer the master who says: ‘Do what you wish except for this or that,’ than the master who says: ‘Do nothing without me telling you what to do’. One is the relationship of sonship, the other of a slave. Such (relatively) non-prescriptive morality embraces the richness and mystery of life created and offered to us.

Some people think that the Ten Commandments are a spoil-joy because of their prohibitions. But these prohibitions are simply warnings about the pitfalls to avoid. ‘The vast and colourful landscape of God's gift of life is yours,’ the Ten Commandments say, ‘Just avoid these pitfalls and the rest of the landscape is yours to explore and enjoy’. By concentrating on the few things not to do, the commandments leave us to explore the vastness of virtue. Virtue is many coloured, while vice is grey. Virtue is a narrow door leading to open places, while vice is a large door leading to a small and barren room.

This truth is embodied in the rich colours used in icons (fig. 6) and in the splendour of decorated Orthodox churches, with their frescoes and mosaics, polished chandeliers, incense, candles and oil lamps. No fluffy white clouds here, but the full feast for all the five senses and faculties that God gave to humankind – body, soul and spirit.

Yet, for all the beauty of its ritual and iconography, the Holy Liturgy is but a hint of the age to come. This is why churches face east, looking towards the return of Christ. It is why many of the mosaic depictions in early Western apses, such the churches of Saint Cecilia in Trastevere and Santa Prassede in Rome, are of Christ coming again in glory, like the sun rising (fig. 7). The tell-tale signs that this is the subject of these mosaics are the brightly coloured clouds of a sunrise and the depictions of the New Jerusalem on the triumphal arch. These mosaics are a sort of holy nostalgia looking towards a final homecoming.

This directional nature of liturgical art is one of the things that informs the icon tradition and the details of its forms. On the one hand the saints’ faces express the joy of God known now and of the Kingdom to come. On the other hand, there is also a certain sorrow and concentration in the saints’ faces (fig. 8). The journey towards the spiritual east requires diligence and care in order to avoid pitfalls. These pits are within the human person and not without, and so asceticism is required, a training of the inner life. Icons reflect this balance of freedom and watchfulness in the demeanour of their saints, a demeanour at once joyous and sober. It is an attention without tension. One term used to describe this dual state is bright-sadness, *charmolypi* in the Greek. Though full of joy, the saints compassionately share in our struggles to avoid the pitfalls and enjoy the pleasures of life with God.

So if to do right is natural for the human person made in God’s image, why are commandments needed, and why this ascetic effort? Prescriptive commands are given by God as guidelines for what is natural. They are reminders of what is already known in the depths, and not surprising news from afar. We have freedom, yet for some inexplicable reason – or non-reason to be more accurate – we sometimes act contrary to our nature and this befuddles our judgement. If sometimes we need to
make an effort to do right and not do wrong it is only because our bad habits have gained hold over us. They become passions in the original sense of the word, for we suffer from them. These passions are not part of our nature but they can become part of our character, and their roots can only be extracted with effort, prayer and divine help.

This is why icons try to combine joy with sobriety. They seek to show us not just the fruit of a life well lived, but how to live that life. When hearing interviews with the great mountain climbers, sportspersons or explorers, and it is surprising how prosaic can be their explanations of their accomplishments. For all the thrill they may get in success, these people will also talk about the years and months of preparation, the long and arduous training, the calmness needed to make difficult decisions, the sustained mental concentration.

I recently heard the singer Patricia Rozario speak about what it was like to work with the composer Sir John Tavener. She said that he did not like his singers to embellish his works with their own sentiments or strong emotions. ‘Let the music come through you and not from you,’ he would tell her. Self-control and sobriety in his performers helped to give Tavener's works their purity and subliminal quality. We can say that the discipline of tradition enhanced the sublimity of the work and did not limit it.

This idea of commandments and structure giving support to beauty is also found in icon painting. Geometry underlies the best works. These hidden geometric forms operate as boundaries, not to constrict but to give greater meaning to the icon. When I design an icon of a sacred event, such as Christ's transfiguration or His ascension, I first draw up some simple geometrical structures that express the event's theology, and then arrange the figures according to these structures. This geometry is hidden and subliminal, but it is there. The Transfiguration icon, for example, might be in two halves to suggest the communion of heaven and earth, and the Ascension icon a half circle atop a square, to symbolise God united to creation.

**In praise of tradition**

It is a peculiar thing that universities are suspicious of tradition in art and yet embrace it in science. For does not the scientist spend years studying the tradition of what previous scientists have discovered, and then add his or her contribution? They may correct errors, but they begin with what is. Far from restricting their progress, this study of past knowledge is the foundation and fuel of the scientist's progress. Why should it be otherwise in art?

Scientists certainly do need imagination to extend or sometimes challenge something in this body of knowledge, but their imagination is acting upon the edifice built by their forbears. They do not pull it all down and begin again, but they adjust or add.

Progress is easier when you push off a solid object. Even recent revolutions in scientific perception, such as the general theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, are usually expansions of what existed before, requiring more precise formulae. Newtonian physics is perfectly workable when things do not move close to the speed of light, but when they do, Einstein's theory of relativity is required. And when we enter the micro scale, quantum mechanics is needed rather than general relativity.

Most of the founding abstract artists of early twentieth-century modernism did not feel they were creating in a vacuum, but considered themselves the latest in a long lineage. The founder of modern abstract sculpture, Constantin Brancusi, wrote: ‘I
never burned my boats, nor pulled out my roots in order to roam giddily. My art
profited from that. Once when his friend Petre Pandrea was praising his sculpture,
Brancusi with his characteristic humour retorted that all he had done was to set up in
Paris a branch office of the Tismana Orthodox Monastery of his homeland in
Rumania. He considered himself part of a long line of tradition.

Of later American abstractionists, Cy Twombly was inspired by Greek and
Roman mythology, epic poetry, and Mediterranean history, and Mark Tobey by
Chinese calligraphy and other Oriental influences. They did not copy these traditions
but tried to enter their spirit and to embody them.

*Traditio* is Latin for handing over or delivering something, so tradition in general is
a body of knowledge or belief handed over. These traditions may be true or false.
Many elements of Aristotle’s scientific teachings for example were incorrect, such as
his belief that all things were made of four elements. Yet this tradition was taught as
inviolable truth for centuries. It was a false tradition, and therefore inhibited rather
than enhanced scientific development.

A tradition that is true is not an arbitrary authority. It is a body of objective truths
discovered or revealed, and over many centuries tested by the experience of many
people (and in the case of science, by experimentation). Generally, if beliefs do not
work in practice they eventually fall out of use. If a civilization does insist on clinging
to a vacuous tradition, as did the Aztec in its human sacrifices, then it will die along
with that deathly tradition.

To belong to a tradition is far from being lazy. Try standing on someone’s
shoulders. A traditionalist must take risks – calculated risks, but risks all the same.
For the duration of his or her lifetime each person is that tradition. The lineage can
reduce with them or can increase with them. They can embody it and thereby
invigorate it, or they can resign themselves to copying all their lives. Copyists might
preserve the one talent given them, but they will not have invested it and multiplied it.

Everyone in fact lives by some tradition. If people reject one tradition they will
adopt another; they must, as there is no such thing as someone who lives by no
tradition or belief system. There is nothing new under the sun and to think one is
entirely independent of previous thought is delusional. A traditionalist is someone
heroic enough to admit that he is a traditionalist, while an anarchist is someone too
cowardly to admit it. A radical is someone deeply rooted in a true tradition and so
produces fresh fruit.

**The Icon Tradition today**

Perhaps it is this combination of depth and freshness, and of mystery and face
that explains the revival of the icon tradition in the West. From the time of the
humanist Renaissance and its cult of the genius, Western liturgical art has been
largely handed over to the individual artist and his or her personal interpretation of
religious themes. But there is now a growing sense that the icon tradition has far
greater depths and mystery, and also more directness, than can be offered by even
the most gifted individual artist. Icons are being widely commissioned by Anglican
and Catholic cathedrals and parishes as well as by Orthodox. And some of these

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5 From Petre Andrea *Constantin Brancusi: Reminiscences and Exegeses* (Meridiane
Publ., 1967).

6 Described in Calinic Argatu’s ‘Peace and Rejoicing’ with Brancusi (Bucharest, 2001).
works draw on western European icon traditions, such as the Romanesque and early Roman.

This is not to say that the icon tradition today is without its own struggles. As mentioned, the form or ‘style’ of icons was greatly compromised in Russia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in Greece during the Ottoman period, so the current revival of a more traditional form of iconography, even in these conventionally Orthodox countries, is nascent. Sometimes copying is mistakenly equated with faithfulness, or the abstract quality of icons taken as freedom to be sloppy with the form of drapery or anatomical proportion. But these challenges facing Christian iconography of today are another topic.
THE TRANSFIGURATION

ICONS DEPICT THE WORLD TRANSFIGURED, LIKE A BUSH BURNING WITHOUT BEING CONSUMED ICON BY THE AUTHOR
THE HOLY MANDYLION
NOVGOROD, RUSSIA
TWELFTH CENTURY
THE MANDILION

BY GREGORY KRUG, FRANCE

TWENTIETH CENTURY
ICONS IN THEIR LITURGICAL AND MULTI-SENSORY CONTEXT WITHIN A CHURCH SERVICE
ICONS AS A MEANS OF COMMUNION – THEY ARE KISSED AS A WAY OF HONOURING THE HOLY PERSON DEPICTED
CHRIST – AN ICON WITH HIS NAMES, JESUS CHRIST (IC XC) AND ‘THE EXISTING ONE’ (‘O ὌΝ)
THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST
ICON BY THE AUTHOR
SANTA PRESSEDE, ROME

APSIDAL MOSAIC SHOWING CHRIST’S SECOND COMING IN GLORY

NINTH CENTURY
ST CUTHBERT OF LINDISFARNE

A FACE SHOWING THE UNION OF COMPASSIONATE SADNESS AND JOY

DETAIL OF A FRESCO BY THE AUTHOR