

# the holy spirit in EASTERN CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY



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## THE HOLY SPIRIT IN EASTERN CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY

Pneumatology, or studies with respect to the Holy Spirit, has long been neglected in the past—like a Cinderella. It proves to be a most difficult doctrine to discuss for many reasons: first, because it has been included in the doctrine of God as a corollary or an afterthought.<sup>1</sup> This also holds true of the orientation of Vatican II.<sup>2</sup> Second, the contemporary Pentecostal movement cuts across all Christian denominations and confessions, and therefore, it is difficult to find a unifying common ground for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> Third, in spite of a very rapid growth of pneumatological interest and a wealth of theological literature on the Holy Spirit,<sup>4</sup> as yet there is no authoritative history of pneumatological dogma.<sup>5</sup> The same holds true in the history of Christian art, for we do not as yet have a comprehensive and exhaustive treatment of the Holy Spirit in Christian art, nor do we have a comprehensive history of the development of the symbolism and representations of the Holy Spirit.

At the outset, however, we must realize, that just as Christianity stands or falls with the faith and commitment to the God-man Jesus Christ, so any serious religion stands or falls with faith in God who is Spirit, and is identified as the Creator, Provider, Redeemer, Sanctifier, and eschatological Fulfiller of the whole created, extradivine reality. In world religions, He is presented as the supreme Being, as Life, as Light and Love, as Goodness and Truth, as supreme Beauty, etc. All these divine attributes can be summed up in the concept of the infinite holiness of the Triadic God.<sup>6</sup>

In my paper we shall approach the mystery of God from an Eastern Christian stance as the infinite, holy and beatifying beauty, and as the Tripersonal reality, the Third Person of Whom is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Divine Beauty.<sup>7</sup> We shall try to portray how the Holy Spirit inspires Eastern Christian iconographers in their religious and artistic endeavor and in turn how He is portrayed by them.

The Primary Chronicle of the Kievan Rus' in the entry under the year 6495 (987 A.D.) makes it clear that St. Volodymyr the Great and the Kievan Rusychi had a highly developed aesthetic sense and that their religiosity was dominated by beauty. It was not the truth or the goodness in Christianity which appealed to them, or created the motive of credibility, but rather the splendor and the

glory of the church architecture, the holy icons, mosaics and frescoes, the liturgical chant and the beautiful dramatic ceremonies which appealed to their religious sense of mystery.<sup>8</sup> In other words, it was neither the *mysterium tremendum* nor the *mysterium fidei*, but the *mysterium fascinans* which was the decisive element of their religious *Weltanschauung*.<sup>9</sup> However, this *mysterium fascinans* is part of the theology of Beauty.<sup>10</sup>

Generally, beauty can be described as the harmony of being, the splendor of form, the immediate, necessary and essential property of any true being. In fact, beauty constitutes the completion of all the other essential characteristics of being. Thus, in an object, its unity, goodness, truth and beauty converge. An object is one, for it possesses an intrinsic unity; it is good for it possesses a perfection of existence; it is true, for it factually exists and can be grasped by our mind and sometimes experienced by our senses; it is beautiful because it is endowed with the harmony of inner unity, goodness and truthfulness, all of which coalesce into one splendid being.

The Triadic God is the Creator of beauty. In fact, He is the archetype of beauty. His essence is beautiful and all three divine hypostases are infinitely beautiful. However, God in His immanence reveals Himself as beautiful primarily through the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit who is the image of God the Father and God the Son as far as their beauty and splendor are concerned. He is the splendor of the divine holiness and the unapproachable light, life and love of the Triadic God. The whole of reality is a divine icon. However, the human being, because of rationality, free will, and aesthetic sense is a very special divine icon, created in the "image and likeness" of God Himself. Therefore, a human being can contemplate his own beauty and grasp within himself the image of the reflection of God who is the Source of all beauty, or Beauty *par excellence*. However, we can delve deeper into the mystery of the divine beauty, for it is God the Father who manifests His beauty through all things; it is God the Son who, as the inhumanized Logos, reveals Himself as the perfect man and the source of human beauty; it is the Holy Spirit who manifests Himself in the activity and dynamics of all existing and acting beings. Here divine omnipotence receives a personalist dimension which can mean the following: the actual, eternal and dynamic activity of God in regard to his creatures is the economic activity of the Holy Spirit which supports the creatures in their existence, their being and operations, without destroying their autonomy, identity, constance and above all inner and outer beauty.

An explanation of inner and outer beauty is now in order. The inner beauty is spiritual in nature, it is sublime and is superior to physical or outer beauty. Sometimes in Byzantine iconography, facial ugliness is not avoided but utilized whenever the supremacy of the inner beauty or beauty of the soul is emphasized. In such cases ugliness repels us momentarily, yet by this very fact it compels us to take note of the expression of inner beauty. The extreme case of facial ugliness can be seen in the icons of St. Christopher with the head of a dog, especially the one from Asia Minor dated 1685.<sup>11</sup> The tradition of the dog-headed men (cynocephali) dates from very early times and is common in Asia,

Africa and Europe. Besides St. Christopher, there are other saints represented as dog-headed men, for example, St. Andrew of Cyncephali in Kokarkilise in Cappadocia.

On the other hand, we can observe icons which stress both inner and outer beauty with respect to the saint depicted, for example, that of the Archangel Michael from the School of Constantinople (fourteenth century). Michael is represented with a youthful, beardless face. The use of modeling in the face enhances the illusion of depth and beauty, and does not conflict with the abstract streaks of light upon the forehead, the cheekbones, chin and neck.<sup>12</sup> Another example of both inner and outer beauty is the Ukrainian icon of the Mother of God of Vyshhorod, popularly known as Our Lady of Vladimir. Both inner and outer beauty are distinguished by the same formal characteristics; simplicity, measure, clarity, harmony and the like.<sup>13</sup> There can be no doubt that inner or spiritual beauty belongs to a higher level of being than outer or physical beauty; however in a different degree of intensity, each beauty reflects the one beauty of God, which exists and manifests itself in the Holy Spirit, the reflection of the holiness, unapproachable light and beauty of God the Father and God the Son. Thus, to be beautiful and to create beauty is, for any rational creature, a necessary existential condition and a moral obligation. Moreover, for a Christian who lives and acts in the Holy Spirit, to be beautiful and to create beauty is an indispensable existential Christian condition and a Christian moral obligation. Failure to do so constitutes, among other things, sin against the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of Beauty and Love.

True art, as understood by Christians, is an attempt by creative intuition and spiritual penetration to make mute nature speak and reveal its enigma by creative word, sound, movement, colour, and form. At the same time, it is a religious attempt to grasp and reveal new aspects of the Triadic God, of His holiness, beatitude, splendor, truth, beauty, and so on. And this is why the poets and other artists are described as "inspired" or "full of God" even in the extra-Christian realm. This is so because true artists are very special charismatics who tend to God the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit under the aspect of beauty. They grasp and express the infinite splendor, holiness and beauty of the Triadic God better than others do. Evidently, they do this with the help and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

With the construction of the Basilica of Hagia Sophia in New Rome under the Emperor Justinian by the architects Artemios of Tralles and Isidore of Miletos, a new era of architecture began, which later was labelled as Byzantine.<sup>14</sup> This architectural form consisted of a rectangle with a regular cross inscribed into it. The roof was fashioned of cupolas or rotundas of which the central was the largest, the one uniting centre of the whole structure. This architectural form has been imitated to the very present day; for example, the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Rome, dedicated in 1969.<sup>15</sup> Inside the main rotunda, a mosaic or fresco of Christ the All-Ruler was placed.<sup>16</sup> It constituted the central point of the whole Church; and upon it all the other decorations converged, that is, frescoes and icons were geared towards the central point in