

Union and distinction in iconography

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Union and distinction: mind, being and divinity

Union and distinction constitutes a profound category of thought. Indeed, as we think about it, it may not be immediately obvious that this category of union and distinction belongs to the very nature of thought itself. We can straight away try a thought experiment to make this clear.

Bring the category of union and distinction to the forefront of your mind. Now try to think in such a way as to avoid the category altogether: see if you can think outside the category altogether, without reference to it or participation in it.

Let us now consider: if while engaging in this experiment we had more than one idea, then we were in the realm of distinction, since plurality necessitates distinction. Even if we entertained only one clear idea within the experiment, then we remained in the realm of distinction insofar as we, the thinker, were distinct from our thought or idea. We may want to say that we were entirely identified with the idea upon which we concentrated to the point of total unity, thereby advocating a fundamental monism in which, ultimately, all distinct phenomena, and certainly material phenomena, are illusory.

Whatever the conclusions we might reach in our deliberations, we have here just a hint - if we didn't know it already, implicitly or explicitly - of the fundamental place that the category of union and distinction holds with regard to our thought and indeed our being,

It will surely then come as no surprise to see that the category of union and distinction is core to theological descriptions. Consider the following.

- In the Trinity, there is a union of essence and there are distinctions between the three Persons.
- In Christ, there is unity in personhood, and there are distinctions between the two natures and wills.
- In each human being, there is a union of the distinct body and soul.

Note that these unions and distinctions are not of the same order. The union of the three persons of the Trinity is of a different kind to the union of the human soul and human body, for example: each is a different kind of union and involves different kinds of distinctions.

We've begun in a philosophical-theological manner, and I must emphasize that I speak with an awareness that the Christian philosopher's terms are not necessary to understand the iconographer's work; nor is there any requirement for iconographers to express themselves in the philosopher's terms.¹ On the other hand, I do advocate that both the iconographer and the Christian philosopher are theologians: iconographers are theologians by virtue of their brushstrokes, Christian philosophers are theologians by virtue of their words. Christian iconographers and philosophers can learn from one another because, fundamentally, they're doing the same thing.

From distinctions to union: prayer

The same thing that they're doing is, put one way, prayer. Prayer itself is a movement from plurality to unity. On this, hear the words of + Kallistos Ware concerning the hesychast, who is any person who practices prayer of stillness (*hesychia*) in Jesus. 'To be a hesychast', he writes, 'is to ascend from the level of [*dianoia* to that of *noesis*, from] discursive thinking to direct intuition and unmediated spiritual vision. It is to pass from multiplicity to unity, from diversity to noetic poverty, from the complexity of rational argumentation to the simplicity of living union'.²

You will immediately recognize our category used here to describe the core movement of prayer. Note +Kallistos' strong emphasis on the dynamic quality of prayer. The hesychast moves from multiplicity to unity, from diversity to union. From, to; from, and to.

Then he goes on to say this: 'Hesychasm signifies imageless prayer and wordless contemplation.'³ This state of imageless prayer and wordless contemplation is the state of union.

Now a question for us is what we make of the icon at this point of union, of imageless prayer, for the icon, being material, lies in the realm of distinctions. I want to keep initially in the realm of thought and verbal language in order to respond to this question, a question which concerns the nature of the icons we make.

From distinctions to union: the language of scripture

One place to find great expression of dynamic of prayer that moves from plurality to unity is the writing of St Dionysius the Areopagite, or Denys, as he is also known for short. He was likely a sixth century Syrian monk. His surviving work pulses with an extraordinary elevating rhythm – I most highly recommend it, and do bring him up in discussion if you want to know more.

Here is an interpretation of how Denys analyses the movement to unity which he does in a

¹ One could as well call iconpainters philosophers: "[T]he fact that the Christian philosopher consciously compares iconpainting and ontology does not lead the iconpainter to use the philosopher's terms; rather, the iconpainter expresses Christian ontology not through a study of its teachings but by philosophizing with his brush." Florensky, *Iconostasis*, 57.

² Kallistos Ware, *Act out of Stillness*, 8.

³ Kallistos Ware, *Act out of Stillness*, 8-9.

consideration of biblical language about God.

There is first an affirmative theology, which affirms a particular statement about God.⁴ So we might say, for example, God is good, or God is love. So far so good! But do these words and their associated concepts really encompass God? Is God not more than all of these words and their associated concepts; is God not transcendent to all of them? For God is not circumscribed, or bound, by words and ideas. And so we deny the final effectiveness of these descriptions of affirmative theology. In so doing, we are already engaging in a second step of the dynamic, negative theology.⁵

Now pause a moment. We have considered affirmations about God, that, for example God is good. And we have considered that such descriptions are not comprehensive, and as such have entered into negative theology. Now we go a step further, for on inspection we become aware that these negations are themselves propositions concerning the nature of God. To say the 'God is not good' in the sense the God is transcendent to any of our human notions of goodness is still to posit something of God, viz. that God exists beyond our human notions of goodness. But this is in itself still saying something about the nature of God; it is saying something of God's transcendence. Denys takes us to the point where this negative theology is itself denied; in fact the whole propositional realm is denied as being finally effective in describing God.⁶ Here we have taken a third step, into the realm of transcendent theology, that wordless contemplation of which +Kallistos wrote. It is union with God.

Do you get a sense of the elevating dynamic here? From the areas of distinction that are affirmation and negation to the area of transcendence that is union. Again do read Denys' work if you can, starting with *The Mystical Theology* which is only a few pages long. In his writing you get a sense of the turbulent profusion and then almost the melting of language before the divine. It opens a way to a place of union that is not so much the limit of the mind but the place where the mind is moulded.⁷

Now this dynamic movement applies as much to images as it applies to words.⁸ We've been looking at it with reference to words: we can progress to see how it applies to images.

From distinctions to union: images

In fact the Orthodox – and surely also orthodox? – tradition sees words and images to have equivalence. In the words of an ecclesial text: 'the great work of economy is made known by means of both verbal homilies and iconic figurations'.⁹ By economy is meant here God's

⁴ The Greek word *cataphasis* is also used to describe this affirmative theology, meaning simply 'according to speech / word'.

⁵ The Greek word *apophasis* is also used to describe this negative theology, meaning simply 'away from, or in denial of, speech'.

⁶ Denys, *Mystical Theology*, 1.2: "We should not conclude that negations are simply the opposite of affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion".

⁷ Williams, 'Afterword', 259.

⁸ Bear in mind here the place of the verbal inscription in the icon. It is an essential component of the icon's form: "The inscription expresses the archetype no less, if no more, than does actual representation" (Uspenskii, *Semiotics*, 11). According to the argument of this paper, the inscription, as word, as name, undergoes the same process of elevating transformation as do all words and all images.

⁹ The *Synodikon*, in Barber, *Contesting*, 14.

dispensation, God's grace in creation. Words and images have the same task in the economy of making God known.

The orthodox Christian understanding of how it is that the image – that is, the icon – makes God's work known is an understanding formed over many years, and in particular through the great debates of the eighth and ninth centuries.¹⁰ These have come to be known as the iconoclast debates. Iconoclasts were those who strove to remove icons from Christian liturgy. Those who advocated for the use of icons are known as iconophiles; that is, friends, or lovers, of icons.

For the iconophiles the icon was in one sense *distinct* from the person represented, and in another sense *united* with the person represented.

The icon was *distinct* from the person represented because it, perhaps obviously, is a different thing from the person. It is wood, or paint, or glass or ivory, etc., while the person represented is transfigured flesh, a heavenly body. We can say that they are different in essence. They are essentially distinct.

But the icon is also *united* with the person represented in that it depicts what that person looks like: to use the language of the iconophiles, it is stamped or impressed with the image of that person.¹¹ In this sense we can say that the icon is united with the person by virtue of its likeness. It follows that if a person depicted is not just any human being, but a saint, or Christ, or the Mother of God, then in the icon – which is a different thing altogether from them – we nonetheless encounter these beings insofar as we stand before their likeness, their image. Think here of the image of the monarch, the Queen, in the UK, impressed upon coins, or imprinted upon banknotes, or framed on the walls of diplomats' offices. These of course are secular images, but note that among the very earliest theological citations that form part of the barrage of the iconophiles' defensive arsenal was one (in fact, from Basil of Caesarea) that precisely outlined the specific relation of the Emperor's head on a coin to the Emperor himself. The iconophiles argued that veneration accorded to the saint depicted on the icon was offered, by relation of likeness, to the saint herself, or himself. Here, through a distinct object, we enter into a relation with the very person depicted.

Now I want to clarify the point we've reached here with regard to the iconophiles arguments. I offer you two summarizing points for your consideration.

A first point is that the icon, by virtue of its relation to what it depicts, brings the worshipper in some manner before the person depicted; more precisely, it may bring the worshipper in relation to them.

A second point is that the icon is not in itself holy; it is not intrinsically holy – for, as we have seen, its essence – what it is – is distinct from what it depicts.¹² This point becomes important

¹⁰ “Rather than dismiss Iconoclastic arguments on aesthetic grounds, the Church promulgated devotional portraiture and narrative paintings of Christ's life in which his divinity was stated rather than shown. Questions about the ability of art to convey the divine nature of Christ, something the Iconoclasts deemed impossible, were thus relegated to iconographic conventions that functioned as a universal visual language for the faithful”. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time*, 98.

¹¹ Bissera Pentcheva makes the interesting argument that, “The relief icon most closely conformed to this theoretical model; it defined Byzantine as the culture of the imprint, mold, or seal.” Pentcheva, *Performative Icon*, 631.

¹² This applies too to miracle-working icons. “[W]hile [...] images had the potential to become the site

when viewing or venerating or indeed making an icon – the material icon has on completion, irrespective of blessing, no holiness in and of itself.

To the end of this paper I will take these two points and develop them further. We'll start by taking the first point about relation and go on to consider how the figure in the icon with whom we relate – whether Christ, the Mother of God, or the saints – governs and unifies the composition of the icon by virtue of that person's singular existence in relation to us. This concerns the hypostatic unity of the icon.

The second point, on the essential difference of the icon as materially distinct will bring us, picking up on Denys again, to a consideration of the nature of spiritual experience associated with the icon.

Hypostatic unity

The compositional unity of the icon is not that of Greek classical figuration. Perhaps this is clearly evident, but in what lies the difference?

The Greek figure, whether temple of sculpted body, is unified on account of its harmony, its balance of forms. It is, we might say, beautiful. It is rational. In sum it is a static unity, in which each part has its right place in relation to the ordered whole.

The Christian icon is unified on account of the literally tremendous energy of its principle figure or figures. The figures, in their particular expressiveness – which may well be a vigilant stillness – influence everything around them in compositional terms and as such order a hierarchy of form which they head. This style has been called the sublime.¹³ To use the theological jargon, the unity at issue here is a hypostatic unity – a hypostasis being precisely the manner in which a particular being – this or that man, for example – exists.

With this broad outline of the icon's pictorial unity in mind, we can gain more understanding through a specific example, here Andrei Rublev's *Annunciation*.¹⁴

for the manifestation of miracles, the material object was not itself deemed to be holy." Barber, *Contesting*, 20.

¹³ In particular by P.A. Michaelis. See his *An Aesthetic Approach to Byzantine Art*. USA: Dufour, 1955.

¹⁴ In the Annunciation Cathedral in Moscow, painted 1405. There's a good reproduction on WikiArt. The analysis that follows comes largely from Boris Uspenskii's *Semiotics*.



The Annunciation, *panel icon by Andrei Rublev*

We might first observe that neither the figures nor the buildings have the measure and balance of Greek classical forms. And we can go on to reflect on the principle importance of the figures themselves, not least because the architecture is shaped around them. This is the case not just in the vertical alignment of the buildings' high structures with the persons, but also in their very inconsistency – note how the building behind the Archangel is aligned frontally where closest to the Archangel situation, but turns angle at the top structure where further away from the Archangel to conform to a different vantage, probably that of conventional perspective.¹⁵ We see here a hierarchy of significance in the composition in which the figured hypostases are dominant. It is a clear example of hypostatic unity.

Here then, just briefly addressed (I say briefly addressed, because I know Aidan has discussed this with you before), is a description of the unity that governs the icon, being the expression of a hypostatic relation that is at once present in likeness yet also absent in that the person's real existence stands essentially distinct from the icon itself.

¹⁵ '[O]ne is able to formulate the following law: the semantically important part of the object being depicted is turned toward the viewer (presented in a frontal view), while the semantically unimportant part is subjected to perspectival deviations which indicate the actual position of the object in three-dimensional space.' Uspenskii, *Semiotics*, 63.

Union and transfigured distinctions

Since we don't see the real person in the icon itself, what are we to say of how we experience that person – again whether Christ, the Mother of God or one of the saints – through their likeness in the icon?

Here I want to argue that the historic Iconophile arguments that we have considered at points so far are not enough to provide a satisfactory answer. You may well have already come across John of Damascus and Theodore of Stoudios, even the patriarch Nicephorus, in your reading: they give mighty defences of the liturgical use of icons. But they will not tell you much, if anything, of what it means to experience the divine as one stands or prostrates oneself before the icon.

In the writings of these great iconophiles, you will find a good deal of writing on imprinting and impression. This model of imprinting and impressing works as follows. The iconographer prays in mind and heart upon the model, or archetype, and accordingly receives an impression or print in their memory. They then exercise their hand to the chosen material to impress that material in accordance with the impression that they have in their memory. So the icon here is a kind of double imprint, first of the iconographer's mind and then of the material. The primary point here was to establish the mode by which the icon resembled the archetype, and this was all that the iconophiles needed in order to make their case in their context. They did not need to provide a fuller experiential account of icons.

I have found it surprising that it is from theologians who don't write a great deal directly on icons themselves that we get a fuller sense of how the icon is placed with respect to religious or spiritual experience. The particular theologians I'm thinking of here are Maximus, Symeon and Gregory Palamas. In what follows I say nothing novel – and I can recommend contemporary thinkers who communicate better than me¹⁶ – but I want to offer you a least a short cut to some relevant elements of these theologians' thought in the short time that we have together.

We can consider some of their thinking by way of a critique of a commonplace view of the icon as a window through which there's a kind of *mutual* gaze. This view proposes that as we stand before and look at an icon of, for example, Christ, we are embraced by the gaze of Christ as if He were looking through the icon at us. The core argument against this view, in short and summary form, is its tendency to assume the persistence of a conventional object-subject relation with respect to the seer and the seen. One form of this critique runs as follows: if Christ is gazing at me, insofar as I am a spectator of a material icon depicting Him, then I am surely utterly overwhelmed such that my mundane aesthetic perception regarding any kind of window or screen through which I see is rendered irrelevant at best. Another distinct form of this same argument is that in looking at the icon I can easily reduce the reality of Christ to that which I see visibly in the icon: Christ's transcendence is accordingly diminished.¹⁷ On both of these counts, the problem of this 'mutual gaze' view of the icon is its tendency to maintain throughout the untransformed status of the spectator, as a subject looking externally with mundane physical and intellectual eyes.

What is instead required is an understanding that the viewer her or himself is elevated, through an inner transformation, to unity with the very thing seen. On this understanding,

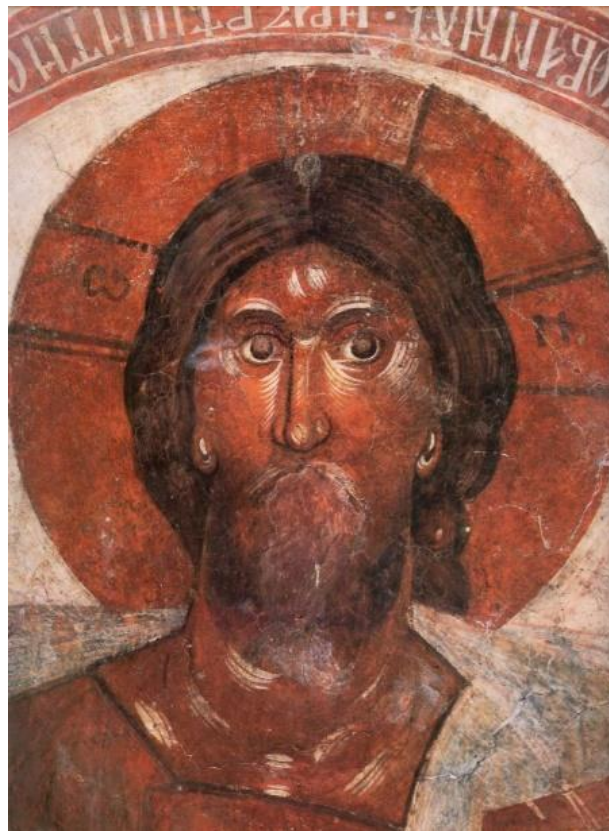
¹⁶ Esp. Charles Barber, Cornelia Tsakiridou – see bibliography.

¹⁷ Barber, 'Beyond', 344.

the spectator of the icon is transformed, “such that the divine light has become visible to eyes that themselves become divine.” Here there is not so much an exchange of looks as a taking upon oneself of the gift of the vision of God. One here sees as God sees, by God’s grace. It is worth noting that this understanding, being transcendent to the notion of a mutual gaze, stands against all notions of seeing images in the modern period in which the positing of spectator and object, or subject and object is so firmly established? On this understanding, one becomes godlike, beyond all mundane seeing.

Certainly, the material icon is transcended at this point. Indeed, a contemporary writer has called it a moment of “contesting the logic of painting”, or “escaping the logic of painting” (even the “ruin of painting”)¹⁸: it is a moment when the “beholder becomes subject to the subject of the painting rather than the painting itself”, “the moment when they open themselves up to the gift of spiritual seeing.”¹⁹ In this moment of spiritual seeing, in the words of Symeon the New Theologian, one sees ‘no shape or form or impression, but formless light’.²⁰

With these words of Symeon – which resonate with those of +Kallistos earlier – I hope you might register that we’re right into the play of denial and transcendence that we explored with Denys in the movement from distinctions to union. First the iconic image is seen, then set aside as insufficient for existential union, which in turn is made possible (though never necessary) by a transcendence of both these prior affirmations and negations of the image. And at this point, with Denys, and Symeon, and +Kallistos, we are most definitely at the point of transcendent union.



Christ, fresco by Theophanes the Greek.

¹⁸ Barber, ‘Beyond’, 344ff.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Symeon, *Traité*s 202.100-01, in Barber, *Contesting*, 28.

Now, that a saint might be given to see as God sees, being raised to a state of union with God, does not mean that she doesn't see any distinctions: rather, the distinctions which she sees are transformed just as her senses are; there is a holistic transfiguration in which all is replenished and made anew. This transfiguration may, perhaps must, include even the icon, the work of art itself. With respect to the icons of Theophanes the Greek, Cornelia Tsakiridou writes this: "It is as if art has absorbed theophany and stands now in lieu of the *visio dei*. The aesthetic object is present but its materiality is transcended the moment it is perceived. Art brings theophany to the senses and is itself transfigured in the process".²¹

Union indeed, and transfigured distinctions.

oOo

²¹ Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time*, 256. Also this: "Theophanes may have painted the quintessential icon that so many Byzantine *ekphraseis* made their ideal. For us this means that an image can enter the realm of theophany aesthetically without the need of representation or symbolism by simply being itself." Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time*, 258.

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