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### Blurred Lines: The Iconostasis' Role In The Eastern Orthodox Church

In Eastern Orthodox Christian churches of Byzantine tradition, an opaque screen made of stone, wood, or metal separates the sanctuary from the nave. This screen, or iconostasis, serves several purposes when examined from architectural, symbolic, and historical points of view. Scholars hold varying opinions of its purpose in these various realms. Is this intricately carved and adorned screen a barrier or a gateway? To what extent has the iconostasis changed over time? How does its purpose relate to the tenets of Christianity? Although scholars may differ in opinion as to the extent to which the iconostasis serves as an architectural, symbolic, or iconographic structure, its longstanding importance to the experience of the Eastern Orthodox Church experience is irrefutable. The iconostasis's architectural, symbolic, and iconographic functions combine to demonstrate the most essential teachings of Christianity in the microcosm of a church.

The iconostasis' architectural purpose must be examined relative to the typical layout of the Eastern Christian church in order to be fully appreciated. Upon entering the church, one first steps into the narthex. Visitors then pass through an arched wall that separates the narthex from the nave, in which worship takes place. At the far end of the nave stands the iconostasis, which separates the altar from the nave. The altar represents Paradise and, in keeping with this symbolism, is always oriented eastward.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mihaela Palade, "The Gateway in the Heaven's Wall: Symbolic Peculiarities of the Iconostasis in Orthodox Churches," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 9 (April 2013): 127.

The majority of iconostases follow the same general, vertically and horizontally partitioned design. An arched opening, known as Holy Doors, Beautiful Gates, or Royal Doors, stands in the center of the screen. Two other openings, often referred to as Deacons' Doors, flank the Holy Doors to the north and south. Icons cover all panels of the iconostasis, including the doors, in horizontal, three-tiered arrangement.<sup>2</sup> In this arrangement, the bottommost tier is called the Sovereign tier and consists of icons of Saints and Fathers of the Church, and Christ. Above this layer are feast day icons. The topmost layer features icons of the apostles and the prophets, and at the top of the iconostasis stands the Crucifix with Mary and John. Whereas icons of local saints may vary from church to church, two icons appear on every iconostasis in the same position: the Incarnation appears on the left of the Royal Door, and Christ in Majesty appears on the right side.<sup>3</sup> During the Iconoclasm period of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, aniconic, ornamental motifs came to dominate iconostases.<sup>4</sup> Once the use of icons became popular once again, however, iconographic representations returned to the iconostasis, but many of the aniconic motifs remained.

As an architectural element, the iconostasis serves, as Mihaela Palade describes it in "The Gateway in the Heaven's Wall: Symbolic Peculiarities of the Iconostasis in Orthodox Churches," as both a dividing wall and a gateway.<sup>5</sup> Whereas the iconostasis separates the nave from the altar, it is not always an opaque screen. When the Royal Doors open, the laity can see the altar—the church's representation of Paradise. For

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<sup>2</sup> Palade, 132.

<sup>3</sup> "iconostasis." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition.* Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2013. Web. 15 Sep. 2013: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/281578/iconostasis>.

<sup>4</sup> Georgios Kellaris, *The Iconography of Sanctuary Doors from Patmos and Its Place in the Iconographic Program of the Byzantine Iconostasis*. Thesis. McGill University (1991): 6.

<sup>5</sup> Palade, 128.

certain holidays, such as Bright Week, the doors never close, symbolizing the opening of Heaven.<sup>6</sup> At the consecration of a church, all members of laity are permitted the altar. Thus, entrance into the altar is not made totally unobtainable. Palade argues that in addition to the glimpses of the altar afforded by opening the Holy Doors, an icon on the iconostasis also serves as a more than “just an empty portion on the iconostasis wall.”<sup>7</sup> Rather, an icon is a “window onto eternity.”<sup>8</sup> Icons, though physically opaque, exist on the iconostasis as symbolic apertures inviting the laity to enter Heaven spiritually.

In Architecture as Icon: Perception and Representation of Architecture in Byzantine Art, Slobodan Ćurčić et al., expand the definition of icon past that of a symbolic representation on an iconostasis to the iconostasis as a whole. Under this definition, the iconostasis is the “ultimate manifestation of architecture as icon—its great boundary wall covered with a veritable summa of all icons.” Beyond the imagery of saints on the iconostasis, Ćurčić et al. argue, the iconostasis as a symbolic architectural element is an icon in and of itself. Ćurčić et al. consider the iconostasis as a two-dimensional “unfolded church interior.”<sup>9</sup> “While painted church interiors continued to fulfill their established function of symbolizing the Christian universe,” they write, “the iconostasis may be said to have increasingly assumed the symbolic role of the church building itself.”<sup>10</sup> Instead of looking at one icon of a saint as one would when looking at a normal icon, worshipers in front of the iconostasis may look at a representation of the entirety of the church itself in a contained, two-dimensional display. By this logic, then,

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<sup>6</sup> Palade, 130.

<sup>7</sup> Palade, 132.

<sup>8</sup> Palade, 132.

<sup>9</sup> Slobodan Ćurčić, Euangelia Chatzētryphōnos, Kathleen E. McVey, and Héléne Saradi, *Architecture as Icon: Perception and Representation of Architecture in Byzantine Art*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Art Museum, 2010), 27.

<sup>10</sup> Ćurčić et al., 27.

the iconostasis acts both an architectural element and a symbolic representation—or icon—of the architecture of the church.

Taken into consideration with the rest of the church’s architecture, the iconostasis goes beyond symbolic representation of the church and into symbolic representation of the worshiper’s relationship to God and the worshiper’s journey to Heaven. In “The Iconography of Sanctuary Doors from Patmos and its Place in the Iconographic Program of the Byzantine Iconostasis,” Georgios Kellaris proposes the idea of the church as a microcosmic reenactment of the cosmic levels and the “Trinitarian nature of God.”<sup>11</sup> The church, divided into three sections, is “a micro-universe.”<sup>12</sup> Not only does the thrice-separated church echo the Holy Trinity, but the division of the church into three chambers by walls also creates a sense of orchestrated mystery that crescendos with each barrier passed. With each barrier passed, the terms of entry become increasingly exclusive until one finds himself in front of the iconostasis—the last, impassable yet inviting barrier. Literally, the altar lies behind the iconostasis. Symbolically, the iconostasis is the gateway to Paradise.

The saints depicted on the iconostasis bridge disparate worlds: symbolic and physical, perfect and mortal. Saints, according to Kellaris, are “the ambassadors of humankind in heaven; the colony of the Church in heaven, the factual proof of our heritage in the Divine kingdom.”<sup>13</sup> Saints bridge the mortal and mystical worlds. Through glimpses through the iconostasis and belief in the saints’ stories, one can sense the existence of a mysterious, unattainable Paradise. If the iconostasis were entirely opaque, bereft of iconography, and if the laity could see nothing of the altar behind it, would the

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<sup>11</sup> Kellaris, 73.

<sup>12</sup> Kellaris, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Kellaris, 79.

goal of acceptance into Paradise seem as accessible and inviting? In addition to the layers of symbolism entrenched in the iconostasis, its function is suggestive and theatrical as well.

By engaging the claims of two scholars previously mentioned in this paper in discussion with one another, a clearer idea of the iconostasis' purpose comes into view. In "The Gateway in the Heaven's Wall," Palade asserts that the iconostasis "plays no architectural role, it is not a functional element. Its use is iconographical; from it derives its theological, spiritual function."<sup>14</sup> The iconostasis, according to Palade, appears to be a barrier but is in fact a gateway. Ćurčić et al., however, would disagree with Palade's claim that the iconostasis serves no functional, architectural purpose. Not only does the iconostasis emulate the architecture of the entire church on one wall, but it also serves as a boundary between the earthly and heavenly realms, "making God's heavenly realm spiritually visible but only to those who are truly enlightened spiritually."<sup>15</sup> Ćurčić et al. claim that it is not the iconostasis itself at the root of differing opinions of its purpose, but rather the flawed understanding of Byzantine architecture. "Byzantine perception and representation of architecture," Ćurčić et al. claim, "differ sharply from our visual expectations, largely on account of our own visual training, which is strongly dominated by the legacy of Renaissance art and theory."<sup>16</sup> This mismatch in perceptions leads to the exclusion of architecture in the study of Byzantine art in favor of symbolic and representative content. Given the iconostasis' varied definitions and uses, it exists and is interpreted in several realms of understanding. To one scholar, it is architecture. To

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<sup>14</sup> Palade, 128.

<sup>15</sup> Ćurčić et al., 28.

<sup>16</sup> Ćurčić et al. 32.

another, it is strictly iconography. To one worshiper, it is a barrier, and to another, it may be a gateway.

The iconostasis is defined by its relationship with boundaries. Not only does it symbolize the permeable, malleable border between the mortal and spiritual worlds, but it also acts as a boundary in the church and straddles the boundary between architecture and icon. If we are to accept the church as a microcosm of the cosmic universe, we must accept that the role of the iconostasis cannot be easily delineated. Rather, the iconostasis serves its many functions in order to achieve the ultimate goal of establishing a symbolic and architectural structure to guide the worshiper's experience in the church. The iconostasis' placement relative to the church's layout and its ornamentation, apertures, and icons communicate the importance of respecting and aspiring to surpass boundaries in Eastern Orthodox Christian worship.

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

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