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Material Culture, Place, and the Creation of Memory

Icons: Commemorating Holy Memories through Material Culture

Visual depictions of Biblical scenes, Saints, and even the holy Trinity of Christos are commonly portrayed in Icons, the term referring broadly to artistic visual depictions of holy Church Fathers and Saints using different media. Icons are seen in classic oil paintings on canvas and wood, or carvings in jewelry pendants and rocks. Despite the varying media they are made from they often share some common characteristics. For example, they often lack hyper realistic facial depictions but embody clear markers or associations drafted from hagiographic documents that help identify each Iconic figure. Some icons have textual writings that clearly state the name of the figure or a brief reference to the scene depicted. Even though they may seem as naive artistic portraits without deeper meaning at first, their structured use and religious integration into the Orthodox church's practice is both fascinating and instructive.

In her essay "Icons in the devotional Practices of Byzantium" Anastasia Dandraki recalls the information regarding the veneration of icons of the late bishop of Antioch, Meletios, during the fourth century. This information is passed down in a homily by a Church Father, Saint John Chrysostom, which clarifies the close relationship between the image and words that both work to identify the Iconic interpretation. Icons are often identified through the lenses of multiple holy texts starting with biblical references or stories, Church Fathers' homilies, hagiographies, and liturgical hymns and practices. The veneration of an icon is ultimately managed by the common believer even if the church provides the frame of interpretation. The common believer is left with the duty of self-policing oneself to not fall in the trap of venerating the image rather than the

saints or holy texts behind it, as it would stir toward paganism rather than the initial intent of monotheistic belief with veneration of holy Men.

This however is not surprising since the shift from the Old testament to the New testament marks the revolutionary rise of nuances in Christian theology which confused many Jews during the fourth century. Christianity is based on purifying thoughts and intentions not only actions, which the Old Testament focuses its law on managing actions. The most obvious example may lie in the laws placed on adultery: Moses's Hebrew law clearly condemns adultery amongst the ten commandments "thou shall not commit adultery." (Exodus 20:14), where adultery is defined as the relationship between a man with a married woman, as well as the sexual relations between any man and woman outside of marriage as stated in Deuteronomy 22:18.

In Christianity, on the other hand, a nuanced definition of sin and shift from emphasis on law to internal morality is clearly witnessed in Mathew 5:17-end. In this chapter the guilt shifts to equalize male and female desires, and the metaphysical ethics are highlighted over civic morality where anger is condemned before murder, and lust of any kind is despised before physical adultery. This movement, unique to its age and the previous Jewish law, holds one's hidden thoughts and desires to equal standards as their seen civic engagements. Moreover, Christianity holds both men and women to equal standards when it comes to adultery, in opposition to the Jewish law that held a woman to higher standards placing the guilt on her broken purity and shamed civil status. Hence, Christianity's most nuanced aspect during its rise was the responsibility that lies on the common believer in policing one's own thought that is not policed by civic law and is not shared with others. Some may view this is a delusional system,

while Christianity reinforces a system where the unseen relationship between the believer and God is more important than that seen and judged by others.

Similarly, the responsibility of self-policing one's attachment to icons in order to insure proper veneration of the Holy Man rather than the materialistic artistic media lies majorly on the common believer's self-awareness. In the eighth and ninth centuries, the rise of Iconoclasm originated out of concerns around the relationship between icons and paganism. In both Paganism and Christianity, physical visual depictions were treated as holy and people used them for prayers. This led to the rise of the Iconoclastic movement with many adopting attitude of Iconodules which was crystalized during the council of Nicaea of 787, but this ultimately led to the triumph of orthodoxy in 843. As Peter Brown clarifies in his essay, "A Dark - Age Crisis: aspects of the Iconoclast controversy," there were many influences that pushed for the iconoclasm movement and 'un-Byzantine' thoughts, such as the rising Islamic rejection of visual depictions of holy men, ultimately influenced Emperor Leo III to support the Iconoclastic stand. However, examining the non-Christian influences of the eighth century suggest that both Islamic-and Jewish Arab thoughts fueled the movement. Leo III viewed the massive rise of Islam and the success of Arab conquests in the area including Egypt, which represented a center of power and Christian alliance in the Church of Alexandria, as a sign that God was shunning his Christian people due to their use of Icons. In fear of escalating God's anger, many sober church bishops and members suggested the hindrance of Icon usage in fear that it would turn to a paganist practice. Due to its alienness, the iconoclasm movement is often viewed as a nuanced non-Hellenic movement, and the ultimate triumph of Orthodoxy embodies the triumph of mainstream culture.

Iconoclasm could be simplified as the fear of some Christians that the veneration of icons would develop into an idolatrous practice. However, since the end of Iconoclasm in 843, Icons have grown to be an integrated part of the Orthodox Church's practice, including its carefully crafted liturgy. The vita of St. Theodore of Studios says that on one Palm Sunday Theodore ordered the monks to take up icons and go around the monastery enclosure singing this troparion, along with other 'triumphal hymns.' Icons now surround inner church walls and even the outer ones. The common believer's relationship to an Icon resembles their veneration of a saint and often their hopes of asking for blessings in the Saints name, with the realization that only Christos is God, with Saints being His servants on earth and in heaven. Candle lighting is a common practice in front of icons, as one prays before an icon they would light a candle that is left burning in front of the icon. Others place silver and gold mini-icon pendants before icons as a form of showing gratitude especially if a miracle asked in the name of the saint has come true. These form of seemingly materialistic forms of icon veneration are aimed to be motivated by spiritual elevation that helps bridge a connection between the common believer and the heavenly world they seek. This integration of simple physical visual depictions of Holy Church figures as well as theological concepts into the daily practices of the worshipper whether it is during liturgy prayers or even to populate their homes is a fascinating example of commemorating memory of those who stand examples in the Orthodox Church.

The Prodromos Monastery of Serres embraces icons from over the centuries including the two silver plated Icons of Christ and Virgin Mary, with the rich history that records both political and religious interests in the icons as they traveled away from the monastery for years before their final return. During the time in the monastery I aim to pay closer attention to key elements that identify icons of different time periods and their closeness to realism versus abstract

depictions. I also plan on attending liturgies to examine the current practices that involve icons in the Orthodox Church.

Works Cited

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