Greek Orthodox Iconography from a Historical and Cultural Perspective

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This paper will examine the historical events that made an impact on Greek Orthodox Iconography including the Iconoclastic period, and its acceptance into the Greek Orthodox community during the Byzantine period. As well as looking at the dogmatic meaning of the “icon” in the Greek Orthodox community, I will evaluate through the interview results collected from the youth, elderly and priests of the Greek Orthodox community of South Australia whether the initial dogmatic purpose of the “icon” is understood and upheld by the community of today.

Introduction

“Φιλήσε την εικόνα, και κάνε το σταυρό σου.” “Kiss the icon, and do your cross.” These are the words spoken into the ears of nearly every young Greek Orthodox Christian child in the world and my own. This paper will explore Greek Orthodox Iconography and shine some light onto an important aspect of the Greek Orthodox faith that is not so much lost, but possibly misunderstood or unknown by many in the Greek Orthodox community.

There are many dogmatic, artistic and cultural issues associated with Iconography throughout its long history. I will focus on the initial dogmatic purposes of icons and their initial perceptions by Orthodox followers of the time. This analysis will then assist me to compare the initial perceptions against present day beliefs as held by members of today’s Greek Orthodox community in South Australia. This will be done by examining and explaining the results of confidential interviews.

Through my research I found that icons were not a Christian invention. Iconography is an art form that initially came about from the Egyptian influence of the Fayum portraits and then the Roman catacombs (Weitzmann, 1978:8; Cavarnos, 1993:26; Grabar, 1969:7). The initial introduction of Iconography was one that was not accepted universally throughout the Byzantine Empire.

“Icon” from the Greek word eikones in the broad sense of the word’s original meaning was an image, any image (Weitzmann, 1978:7; Brooks, 2001). Today in a more
restricted and dogmatic sense the word icon is a description of a wooden panel painting of a “holy image” (Weitzmann, 1978:7; Brooks, 2001; Temple, 1989:4). As stated by the Macquarie University dictionary (1998:559) an icon is a “... representation in painting, enamel, etc., of some sacred personage, such as Christ or a saint or angel in the Orthodox sphere of Christendom” (Skrobuche, 1963:v). There are many dogmatic aspects of Byzantine Iconography. The purpose of the icon is not simply to adorn the church with its beauty, and through this paper I hope to look briefly at the initial religious purposes of the Byzantine icon.

The cultural section of this paper will bring all aspects of my research together in an analysis of interview results with the objective of determining the views of today’s Greek Orthodox community on the dogmatic and cultural aspects of this paper. The icon was initially created for the purpose of the church; however, through public demand we saw the introduction of the icon into the home. Through interviews with Priests, Iconographers and Greek Orthodox followers, I hope to determine what knowledge of icons both historical and dogmatic is known by the Greek Orthodox community of today. Through my research I have been unable to find or obtain some relevant pieces of work that conveyed how icons are perceived by today’s Greek Orthodox society. This is why the results of my interviews with both Greek Orthodox followers who have knowledge in the area of Byzantine iconography and those who have no researched knowledge in the area are so critical to this study. The results of the interviews will constitute an interesting look into whether or not there are similarities between the scholarly history and the oral history passed down through generations in the Greek community.

Brief history of initial views of icons

All religions throughout history have witnessed the introduction of something new, or reactions against innovations. The Greek Orthodox religion is no different. With the development of these new spiritual pieces of art came supporters and detractors.

The “image lovers”, those who supported the creation of icons were called “Iconodules” or “Iconophiles” (Temple, 2004:212). The Iconodules’ argument for icons was that neither the materials or colours, nor the images themselves were being worshipped, and that icons were permitted as God himself made himself present as man, so as to be portrayed in icons (Weitzmann, 1978:8). Icons were images that were believed to facilitate contact between devotee and the Saint or person depicted (Weitzmann, 1978:8).

The Iconoclasts were the “image breakers” (Temple, 2004:212). They destroyed icons because they believed that icons were idolatrous works of the Devil (Temple, 2004:23). As they deemed icons to be objects of worship, the desecration of all icons was in their eyes justified. It is believed that their views were based on a “...widespread aversion to the representation of the human form which was rooted in the Jewish heritage of early Christianity...” (Temple, 2004:20; Weitzmann, 1978:7). Iconoclasts believed strongly in the Old Testament statement that “thou shalt not bow down and
worship any graven images” (Temple, 2004:23; Weitzmann, 1978:8). To this day images are banned in Jewish and Islamic faiths (Temple, 2004:23).

**Dogmatic purpose of the icon**

These contradictory views are what led to the Iconoclastic period and Civil War of AD 726–843 that shook the foundations of the Byzantine Empire (Weitzmann, 1978:7; Temple, 2004:212). Iconoclastic comes from the word Iconoclasm literally meaning “image breaking” and refers to a recurring historical impulse to break or destroy images for religious or political reasons (Brooks, 2001). “The Iconoclastic debate centred on the appropriate use of icons in religious veneration, and the precise relationship between the sacred personages and his or her image” (Brooks, 2001).

Among the many suggested causes are the rise of Islam and the Byzantine emperor’s desire to assume religious authority and funds (Temple, 2004:23; Brooks, 2001). The Iconoclastic period came to an end in AD 787 after the Seventh Ecumenical Council restored the use of icons, having agreed to the formulation by which one did not worship the icons, but venerated the figures represented in them (Temple, 2004:212; Weitzmann, 1978). Due to a rapid decrease in the creation and study of icons following the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, many resources are relatively new or in some cases old with knowledge about icons being difficult to find in this slowly reviving field (Temple, 2004:9).

Following the decision made in 787 AD it was universally established that an icon is an image of an event or person whose reality is actually in a higher, invisible and non-material world, whereby through it we are able to experience the transforming power of the divine grace (Temple, 1978:4). For this reason, each line, each colour, each feature of the face has a meaning. The principle figures in the foreground of icons act out an event, either with architecture indicating the enclosed space of the inner spiritual world, or by mountains showing the relationship between the higher spiritual state and lower worlds (Temple, 1989:6). It is believed that Byzantine icons have seven main functions:

1) To enhance the beauty of a church. 2) To instruct us. 3) To remind us. 4) To lift us up to the prototypes. 5) To arouse us to imitate the virtues. 6) To help transform us, to sanctify us. 7) To serve as means of Worshipping God and venerating His Saints. (Cavarnos, 1993:25)

Every one of these points was echoed by all the Fathers interviewed. All of these religious functions are further proof of how the icon is more than just an image in the eyes of many Orthodox believers. T. Morgan (2009:49) best described this as follows: “[The icon] is a holy object because the belief of the believer transcends and changes the wood into a holy relic...” It is also believed that the contemplation of icons allows the viewer direct communication with the sacred figure(s) represented, and through icons an individual’s prayers are addressed directly to the petitioned saint or holy figure present in the icon (Brooks, 2001). The purpose of icons is strongly rooted in
the teaching of the Divine Incarnation, as the image is necessarily inherent in the very essence of Christianity, since Christianity is the revelation by God-Man not only of the Word of God, but also of the Image of God (Ouspensky & Lossky, 1952:27).

Cultural perspectives of today

To this day the icon holds a special place in the lives of Orthodox Christians and you would be hard pressed to find one who has not at one point or another had an icon in their home. I believe that the understanding and meaning of icons is sometimes lost, in not only by young Greek Orthodox Christians but also with many of the older Greeks. I believe this can be put down to a number of reasons that I hope to cover.

The initial purpose of the icon in the home was to provide a constant reminder of our religion in our lives. Seeing the icon everyday would be a reminder of what others have done for the Orthodox faith. This can be seen through a quote by Skrobuche (1963:4) who stated, “When... the saint's portrait stood in the home it would excite respect and the tacit intercourse of the contemplation frequently led to a profound veneration of the picture and of the saint it depicted”. It was not intended to be a good luck charm but a reminder of how we should be living our lives through the guidance of our faith.

Through the results of my interviews I have found that the initial purpose of the icon is felt quite strongly by some and lost in others. One follower stated that they have icons in their home as an aid to prayer. Another person stated that it was simply present in their home as it was a gift. One Orthodox follower had an icon that was passed down to them from their Grandmother who bought it with her from Asia Minor, showing the strong tradition of icons in the Greek Community. A line that was quite common was that the presence of icons was a way of having a representation of their religious beliefs constantly present, giving them the opportunity to be Christians on a daily basis and not just Sunday Christians. Another interviewee stated that their presence provides a great source of spiritual guidance and strength, but they also recognise the stories of many influential Greek Saints. The difference in reasons as to why people have an icon in the home is quite acceptable. I personally believe there is no right or wrong answer even though specific reasons have been set out by the Church. In the end why people have icons and what they believe cannot be set to guidelines as all areas of religion are very subjective and personal.

Prior to my research into iconography I myself had an opinion of icons that was tradition-based on people and events in my life, especially my parents. After certain events I started questioning more aspects of my faith and realised that I wanted to find out more about areas of the Orthodox religion. Through my interviews I found that I have not been the only one since one interviewee stated that they too realised their desire to study more theology about the icon had increased due to life events. I have also found that most interviewees required quite a bit of time to contemplate their answers to my questions. At first when asked a question many interviewees believed they were
unable to answer. Following some contemplation they would constantly look at their tradition-based knowledge to answer what they believed the icons meant. In one case the interview brought about a response of questioning the interviewee's beliefs and finding that as much as tradition-based knowledge and experiences had been provided to them throughout their life, they had to ask how Greek Orthodox they really are.

Through this questioning, I found that most followers believe that they understand what the original meaning behind icons was and is today. In most cases this explanation is the same as to why they have them in the home. I believe that their understanding for the most part is correct; and that the essence of iconography is felt. Regarding issues such as the Iconoclastic period, there is a lack of understanding unless further knowledge has been sought. In regards to the understanding of Iconography by Priests I can say that icons are understood and acknowledged through their studies in their journey to becoming ordained priests in the Greek Orthodox religion.

On the contrary, after interviewing an Iconographer, results showed that instead of their beliefs in the Orthodox faith leading them to an understanding of icons as with the Orthodox Priests, their attraction to the Orthodox faith was a consequence of their attraction to icons.

Consequently, I found that Orthodox followers above the age of forty believed that they knew more about icons, be it right or wrong. It is, however, the youth of today who are more inquisitive about the meaning of icons. This was also a comment made by one of the Priests interviewed. He saw that the younger members of the congregation ask more questions about what icons represent and why we have them, more so than the elderly who simply do their cross without question. He believed that this was based on what the elderly congregation have learnt through tradition and also a lack of education on the topic.

Next I will look into what each individual interviewed believes the community’s views are of icons. As stated through the previous statement, some Priests are open and understanding of the fact that a lot of people, especially the youth are not understanding or knowledgeable in the area of iconography. The Priests interviewed and having this opinion were also aware and believed that today’s youth are becoming more inquisitive in matters of faith than the elderly. On the other hand some Priests (if not naively) believe that it is understood by all the followers of the church to the same extent. One Priest believed that Orthodox Christians, no matter what age bracket they are in, have or should have the same belief about icons, that they are religious items that help express the spiritual side of the Greek Orthodox faith. I can only presume that this thought is coming from the fact that if the Orthodox followers do not understand, then the Priests may have a bigger question to ask themselves about how much the people of today and their congregations really know about Orthodox religion. This comment was also echoed by an Orthodox Iconographer who stated that this lack of understanding has led to many of our attitudes seeming to be Ottoman in nature rather than truly Greek or Christian. Consequently, we, the Orthodox people, really need to examine ourselves and faith more.
I found that most Greek Orthodox followers were very confident in their responses to what they know about the meaning of icons and their significance, however the opposite was felt about their fellow Greek Orthodox followers; one interviewee stated that they believed young people respect icons, but they do not realise their symbolic meaning. Another believed that the Greek Orthodox community's views on icons are not much, because the churches have become only for show and money and have lost their real meaning. One follower even stated that the elderly are possibly more insightful in the area of iconography through their greater understanding of the Greek language and Church sermons. One person went as far as to say that if this language of icons has become unfamiliar to us and seems “naive” and “primitive”, the reason is not that the icon has “outlived” or lost its vital power and significance, but that the knowledge that the human body is capable of spiritual comfort is lost by man. I understand this point of view but I am not going to pass judgment on the interviewees’ answers. I believe that the answers and beliefs of the Orthodox followers are based on tradition, an area that is strongly built into our culture and passed down through the generations. I believe that these tradition-based beliefs stem from wanting to keep their ties to the mother country.

Conclusion

Iconography has been and I believe will be, a constant and pivotal part of the Greek Orthodox religion. Icons are items which are constantly present in the Greek Orthodox Church and they are also something you will find in most Greek Orthodox homes. I approached doing this paper as a way of providing more information on a topic that I believed was not fully understood by the Greek Orthodox community. My goal was to provide a historical outline of the origins of Iconography as well as the dogmatic side of icons and compare these results to interview results to see what the Greek Orthodox community of today really knows about Iconography. To my surprise I found that I too did not fully understand the original desired purpose of the icon or know anything of the historical events that shaped the world of Iconography.

One might say that a lack of understanding and belief is what led to an unnecessary war and the destruction of an unknown amount of icons and history along with them. I also believe that it is the Iconoclastic period along with many other wars in Greece that led to the lack of understanding by present generations. The importance of icons has not always been highlighted enough during Greece's occupation by other countries, leading to information not being passed down through the generations.

The dogmatic section of this paper tested me in a way that I was not expecting, as I considered myself quite knowledgeable in areas of the church. This self-belief was tested when I realised that I was originally only aware of two of the seven religious functions of the icon. I believe this is because up until now I had no desire to dwell deeper into the world of Iconography.
Through the interviews I have collected, I was able to see the strong and constant influence of tradition on the Greek community. As all the Greek Orthodox communities of Australia have come from a migrant background, this background has become the basis of what the community knows and also the reason for the lack of knowledge that they have on the topic of Iconography.

When looking into what the Greek Orthodox community know about Iconography, I found I was provided with something of an oxymoron. The majority of people interviewed believed that they knew what the meaning of an icon is; be it wrong or right. However, when asked their opinion on what they believed the community knew on the topic, they believed that the community lacked an understanding of icons. This provided me with a dilemma; if everyone assumes they know the meaning of icons, why do they think that the community does not? Their statements on their own understanding indicate that the community as a whole should have this understanding as well.

In regards to whether the youth or the elderly knows more about icons, I found the ratios to be quite similar. The youth are more inquisitive about certain areas of religion than the elderly who were more settled on what they had learnt through their traditions and oral history.

I hope that through this paper the Greek Orthodox community will develop a greater understanding and belief in the icon, by informing the reader of the deeper meanings behind icons.

In conclusion, the process of completing this thesis has not only been a learning process in the academic sense but a process of learning something about myself as a Greek Orthodox follower. I found that I came into my research quite naively, believing that I was one of the more knowledgeable people in the area of Iconography. I found that I was wrong and that I am not the only one who has this view of themselves. I believe that this naivety comes not from an ignorance in believing that “we know everything about our religion”, but from a desire to show the wider community that we know something about an area so strongly imbedded in our faith and lives, such as Iconography. It is not simply a matter of researching the topic of Iconography, but looking inside ourselves to see if we understand what icons truly mean and hence comprehend the real meaning of our religion.

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