

MARGARITA KUYUMDZHIEVA, *Ликът на Бога: Изображенията на Света Троица в православното изкуство* [The Face of God: Images of the Holy Trinity in the Art of the Orthodox Church]. Sofia: Институт за изследване на изкуствата 2020. 233 pp. with numerous black-and-white and color illustrations. – ISBN 978-954-8594-94-3

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This is a monumental book which surveys the ways in which Orthodox Christians depicted God from the late antique to the early modern period. It demonstrates how the needs of the audience outweigh the formulations of high theology, endowing with anthropomorphic features even the unseen and ineffable first person of the Trinity, God the Father. Indeed, at the center of the book are anthropomorphic representations of God primarily in the context of church decoration even though panel painting and manuscript illumination are discussed when necessary. Especially valuable is how temporally expansive the book is as it extends past what is considered the Byzantine period. The author covers examples from a wide geographic span including Asia Minor, the Balkan peninsula and Russia. In each chapter she provides extensive overview of past and more recent literature and situates her arguments and conclusions within the existing scholarship. This feature of the book is especially noteworthy, as the reader gets a sense of the life span and importance of different theological postulations and scholarly ideas about the representations of God in the Orthodox world and beyond.

KUYUMDZHIEVA explores the changing and multifaceted images of the Trinity throughout time showing that people have been looking for effective ways to visualize it from the very early centuries of Christian art. The book is thus first and foremost thematic. Each chapter offers exhaustive studies of iconographic variants of the Trinity such as the *Paternitas* and *Synthronoi* types, Abraham’s *Philoxenia*, and the Throne of Mercy.

The first chapter of the book is appropriately dedicated to the doctrinal and liturgical sources for the representations of God. It reveals the author’s sophisticated understanding of the theology pertaining to the Holy Trinity in all its complexity. The chapter discusses also the development of the Byzantine images of God, which, as KUYUMDZHIEVA states, are, for the

most part, Christocentric (p. 28). Of special note is the discussion of the angelomorphic images of Christ as visualizations of His mediating role and not His nature. These images are born out of the exegesis of the Hospitality of Abraham, where the three angels are seen as the three persons of the Trinity and where one is explicitly identified with the familiar IC XC. The angelic qualities of Christ were sourced from the Old Testament and Byzantine homiletics. Thus he was identified with the Angel of the Great Counsel found in Isaiah 9:6 and with Gregory Nazianzenus' description of a tall man with the countenance of an angel in his second homily on Easter (PG 36: 624). Illustrations pertaining to the latter – an eleven-century illumination from a codex with Gregory's homilies in the Dionysiou Monastery on Mt Athos (cod. 61, fol. 4r) and a late thirteen-century fresco in the narthex of the church of the Virgin *Peribleptos* in Ohrid – are incorporated in the book on p. 33 without a single reference to them in the main text.

The second chapter is entitled 'The Ancient of Days' and its primary purpose is to survey and analyze the characteristics of this particular visualization not only of Christ in His eternal form but also of God the Father. The latter contradicts the fundamental Christian understanding that the Father is unknown and thus not representable, yet KUYUMDZHIEVA shows how some Byzantine theologians like Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom and Patriarch Germanos present the Ancient of Days as a way to understand (not necessarily to show in pictures) God the Father (pp 47, 55-57). She further discusses this figure's distinct characteristics – white hair and white clothing. By the 14th century his halo can assume the spiky rhomboid bursts of light seen, for example, in the Transfiguration, and can also acquire the identification O ΩN known from Moses' encounter with God in Exodus 3:14. Especially interesting is the discussion of the post-Byzantine variants of the Ancient of Days as Sabaoth, which emerged in Slavic lands and which contributed additional layers to the meaning of the image. KUYUMDZHIEVA feels that the attachment of this specific name to the Ancient of Days diminishes its Christological significance and moves it more in the direction of a 'syncretic representation of the invisible God, who rules over time and the heavenly powers, and who is being eternally glorified in the heavenly kingdom' (p. 80).

A minor criticism of the chapter is that the author does not engage meaningfully with the visual material. She provides, for example, an intriguing illustration of Christ praying to the Father from an eleventh-century Gospel lectionary in which the latter is represented with the distinct gray hair of the Ancient of Days (p. 41). A discussion of the miniature would have been

especially effective when aligning the image of the latter with the otherwise uncircumscribable Father. Same is true for another figure on p. 55 which shows an enthroned elderly man supporting a younger one to illustrate John 1:18: ‘No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.’ This striking image clearly derives its meaning from its relationship to icons of enthroned Virgin and Child, a point which could not have been lost on the Byzantine viewers. This particular illuminated initial is brought in again in the chapter on *Paternitas* without any reference to its affinity with the quintessential depiction of the Theotokos as the human parent of the incarnate Logos.

The third chapter is concerned with the *Paternitas* type in the renditions of God in which commonly seated full-length elderly figure supports a younger one with or without the dove of the Holy Spirit hovering before the two. This is, according to the author, the earliest anthropomorphic version of the Trinity. The visual references utilized in the text are spectacular in their complexity, and yet are pushed to the side in favor of summaries of primary and secondary literary sources. It remains unclear how the somewhat abstract discussions about the relationship within the Trinity find visual expressions such as those incorporated in the book. For example, what is with the half-figure of the mature Christ being framed by the pinkish garb of the Father in the church of the Virgin *Koubelidiki* in Kastoria (p. 87)? Something similar is seen in the miniature from the Serbian Munich Psalter where the mature Christ is replaced with a youthful one, who emerges from within the garments of the Ancient of Days named as such with an inscription in Slavonic (p. 89). Could icons of the Theotokos with the Child Christ be a guide to these intriguing images? Is it possible that the Virgin’s maternity visually informs God’s paternity?

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the post-Byzantine, including Russian, *Paternitas* types, especially those which contain the dove of the Holy Spirit being placed immediately below the Father, indicating the Orthodox position of His procession from the latter. KUYUMDZHIEVA notes that this version of *Paternitas* appears in regions where Orthodox and Catholics shared living quarters, and where the Orthodox position needed an even clearer visual formulation. In spite of the success of the type, by the 17th century it disappears from iconographic programs of most churches on the Balkans.

Syntronoï, or Enthroned Together, is the title of the fourth chapter of the book. It concerns the composition of God the Father and Christ, both in

human form, sharing a throne with the dove of the Holy Spirit hovering between the two. The type seems to have originated in the West as an illustration of Ps. 109:1 and only later was it transferred to Orthodox territories as seen in the 14th-century frescoes of the Virgin's Church at Mateič and the illuminations of a Serbian Psalter now in Munich (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. slav. 4). The author notes that western models, while possibly influential, were modified by utilizing the image of the Ancient of Days as a visual equivalent of God the Father. The Byzantine depictions thus reflect a more traditional Orthodox understanding about the relationship among the *hypostases* of the Trinity. Unlike the *Paternitas* type, which reflects ideas about the kingship of the Father and the incarnation of the Son, the *Synthronoi* functions in a different theological context. KUYUMDZHIEVA thinks that it was the incorporation of the *troparion In the Grave Bodily* in the Great Entrance that affected the rise of the *Synthronoi* iconography in the Orthodox world. Indeed, in this *troparion*, Christ is said to be physically buried while simultaneously enthroned with the Father and the Spirit. It is this liturgical modification that led, according to the author, to the more frequent visualization of the *Synthronoi* type in Orthodox churches. And while at the beginning this iconography seems to not have been very affected by western influences, later, around mid-16th century borrowings from Catholic art become more apparent. Thus God the Father starts being represented with a staff of office and a sphere was painted between Him and Christ (pp. 112, 114). Occasionally the Father could hold the sphere which is a distinct feature of western *Synthronoi*.

At the end of the chapter KUYUMDZHIEVA argues that the multiplication of this type of representation of God has much to do with the complex historical situations on the Balkans between the 15th and 18th century, when the population was faced with pressures from the Ottomans from the East and from the Catholics and Protestants from the West. The *Synthronoi* was, as the author suggests, a straightforward way to reveal the mystery of the Trinity to Orthodox churchgoers even though it was canonically controversial. In times of need, the church resorted to representations which could preserve the coherence and unity of the faith, putting aside the more abstract theological formulations.

The fifth chapter of the book is dedicated to the fascinating rendition of three-headed angel and three-headed Christ to stand for the Trinity. Most examples seem to have originated in the western edges of the empire, indicating that they may have been a product of a particular intellectual and artistic milieu. KUYUMDZHIEVA suggests that the emergence of this strange

image where three heads share the same body is based on interpretations of God's Holy Wisdom with all its Christological and Trinitarian connotations (p. 143). It is important to note here that one of the early such three-headed figures in the narthex of the Virgin *Peribleptos* in Ohrid is placed immediately across from the image of Wisdom (Sophia) who Built Herself a House. In that latter fresco, the painters incorporated three feminine figures who share the same features as those of the monstrous Trinity on the opposite wall. Were the artists hinting at the Trinitarian context of the scene with Sophia? It would have been very useful if the author had considered a bit more carefully the context for the icons she discussed in this chapter. It would have provided her with subtle clues about the content and meaning of the unusual three-headed Trinity.

The Throne of Mercy, in which the crucified Christ is supported by the Father, is discussed in the sixth chapter. The author notes that in the Orthodox world the image is imported from the West at the end of the 14th century. Its earliest appearance in the East on the island of Crete indicates that the artists were catering to Catholic patrons manifesting the Venetian presence there. In the 15th century a version of the Throne of Mercy appears also in Pskov, Russia with variations rooted in the literary and visual lore of St Francis of Assisi (pp. 147–148). The version of this Trinitarian iconography can be found in the seventeenth-century church of the Nativity in the village of Arbanasi in Bulgaria. The model, KUYUMDZHIEVA suggests, must have been transferred from Russia. In general, Orthodox artists and audience do not seem to have fostered a preference for this iconography.

Abraham's hospitality is the subject of the seventh and last chapter of the book. This is one of the most voluminous chapters which begins with the exegesis and liturgical use of this episode from Abraham's story told in Genesis 18:1–22. KUYUMDZHIEVA notes that by the 9th century certain textual sources relate that Abraham had encountered the Trinity and eventually this was picked up by the visual arts where the middle angel is represented with the red and blue garments of Christ and is identified with the recognizable abbreviation for His name IC XC. In this chapter the author pays much closer attention to images of the Hospitality and the ways in which visual contexts determine its meaning. The *Philoxenia* thus emerges as a multi-layered icon associated with the Eucharistic liturgy and the role of Virgin Mary in the Incarnation. She demonstrates also how the scene is associated with ideas about kingship, especially in relationship to the Serbian ruling dynasty (pp. 182–183).

Like other chapters in the book, this one concludes with a discussion of the main theme, the *Philoxenia*, in the post-Byzantine period. At this time the scene is even more explicitly associated with Virgin Mary through its incorporation in close proximity to visual renditions of hymns dedicated to her (p. 185). The scene ecclesial symbolism was further highlighted when it appeared in relation to the Pentecost or images of the Ecumenical councils. This is especially notable in Russia where a day dedicated to the Trinity was introduced in the 14th century to be celebrated in the Sunday of Pentecost. Icons of the Philoxenia thus start appearing in the Russian iconostases in relation to the icon of Pentecost. This pairing could be seen on the Balkans as well undoubtedly due to Russian influence (p. 187).

In the conclusion KUYUMDZHIEVA identifies the main reasons for the proliferation of the anthropomorphic images of the Holy Trinity in the early modern period. She feels that contributing factors were the theological controversies associated with the encounter with the protestant Reformation. Noteworthy is the author's conclusion that between the 16th and 18th century there is a tendency toward more literal illustrations which are closer to what she calls western allegoric thinking than to distinctly symbolic attitudes found in Byzantine art. This shift allowed for western visual paradigms to penetrate the Orthodox iconographic tradition via prints, travelling artists, and model books.

The book is provided with a table of contents in English as well as with a summary of each chapter also in English which could be helpful to anyone unfamiliar with the intricacies of the Bulgarian language. The bibliography is extensive and will benefit any researcher interested in the ways in which the Orthodox church discussed and accommodated images of God in its buildings, as well as in the private homes and meditations of the faithful.

Keywords

East Christian iconography