

Icons and the Cosmos: The Missionary Significance

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The veneration of icons bears directly on the Orthodox understanding of the visible world, and constitutes therefore what may be a uniquely eastern perspective on the spiritual value of the cosmos, putting Orthodoxy in an excellent position to comprehend the traditional, non-western view of the universe.

Pre-modern societies (defined as those without written language) have universally understood the world in terms of the “sacred.” Their oral traditions, their “mythologies”, constituted the basis for all meaningful activity. “In the beginning...” the stories began. And whatever was done then, “in those days”, must be remembered and repeated by all succeeding generations, for the “beginning” established forever the norms for proper human behavior.

In imitating the actions of the first people or the spirits at the beginning of time, pre-modern peoples sought to become contemporaneous with the time of origins. Life is filled with meaning, and even simple mundane tasks transformed into meaningful and, in fact, eternally significant actions, by the conscious ritualization of daily life, “in remembrance” of the deeds first accomplished “in those days.” The time of chronological history, “line” time, exists only as meaningless, profane time. Time spent *returning* to eternal modes, imitating the archtypes, becomes sacred and “cosmic”, for history is abolished and one lives once again outside it.

Not only time but space is also transformed by the activity of pre-modern society. Certain locations can be eternally significant – epiphanies. When building his house, the pre-modern man deliberately follows an eternal plan, constructing his dwelling according to the structure of the universe itself, a structure he knows from the sacred stories. His hut or tent, no matter how humble, represents to the group a replica of the cosmos. One’s house is therefore transformed into a sacred space, inhabited by people who know their eternal standards for human behaviour, just as the created world is occupied by those whose knowledge of the sacred stories enables them to live as human beings were meant to live. Life is meaningful indeed, drenched with meaning, because it is filled with the sacred.

Christianity has irreparably broken all this, for it has declared history to be significant and linear time to be of supreme value. It has destroyed forever “escape” into “cosmic time” as the norm for human existence in this world. But it also has fulfilled, and not abolished, the basic “intuition” of pre-modern societies; the traditional culture was, in fact, correct in its basic insight that there exists an eternal model for human behaviour, and that it is essential for every person to know and imitate it. The traditional society was also correct in acknowledging that certain times and places have eternal significance for all people. Even their constant reference to “the beginning” was not entirely misguided. Yet none of these societies, groping toward the Truth, could have suspected that the eternal model was not a mythological being who lived “in the beginning” before time began, but a person, Jesus Christ, who entered history during the reign of Caesar

Augustus. This revelation was totally unexpected even among the Israelites who were expecting it, and it assumed a form they could not accept. No one could have fully anticipated what happened “in those days”.

St. Athanasius the Great wrote, “Our Lord took a body like ours and lived as a man in order that those who had refused to recognize Him as Omnipotent King of the whole universe might come to recognize Him from the works He did below in the body, that what dwelled in the body was the Word of God.”

The late British lay theologian, C.S. Lewis, comments that this corresponds perfectly with Jesus’ own statements on the subject of His miracles: “The Son can do nothing of Himself except what He sees the Father do”, adding:

There is an activity of God displayed throughout creation, a wholesale activity let us say which men refuse to recognize. The miracles done by God Incarnate, living as a man in Palestine, perform the very same things as this wholesale activity, but at a different speed, and on a smaller scale. One of their chief purposes is that men, having seen a thing done by personal power on a small scale, may recognize when they see the same thing done on a large scale that the power behind it is also personal – is indeed the same Personal who lived among us two thousand years ago. The miracles, in fact, are retelling in small letters the same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see... In other words, some of the miracles do locally what God has already done universally; others do locally what He has not yet done but will do. In that sense, and from our human point of view, some are reminders and others are prophecies.

God creates the vine and teaches it to draw up water by its roots and, with the aid of the sun, to turn water into a juice which will ferment and take on certain qualities. Thus each year from Noah’s till ours, God turns water into wine. That, men fail to see. Either like the pagans [or pre-modern tribes] they refer the process to some finite spirit, Bacchus or Dionysus, or else like the moderns, they attribute real and ultimate causality to the chemical and other material phenomena which are all that our senses can discover in it. But when Christ at Cana makes water into wine, the mask is off. The miracle has only half its effect if it only convinces us that Christ is God: it will have its full effect if whenever we see a vineyard or drink a glass of wine we remember that here works He who sat at the wedding party in Cana. Every year God makes a little wheat into much wheat: the seed is sown and there is an increase, and men according to the fashion of their age say, “It is Ceres”, “It is Adonis”, “it is the Corn King”, or else “It is the laws of Nature”. The close up, the translation of this annual wonder is the feeding of the five thousand. Bread is not made out of nothing. Bread is not made from stones... A little bread is made into much bread. The Son will do nothing except what He sees the Father do. There is, so to speak, a family *style*.

When He fed the thousands, He multiplied fish as well as bread. Look in every bay and almost every river. This swarming pulsating fecundity shows He is still at work. The ancient Greeks had a god called Genius – the god of animal and human fertility... This miraculous multiplication of fish reveals the real Genius. (Lewis)

Reference:

Lewis, C.S. "Miracles" in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. By Walter Hooper, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, pp. 29-30.

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