

THE SCIENCE OF CORRESPONDENCES SHEDS LIGHT ON RUSSIAN ICONS[†]

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INTRODUCTION

Is philosophy about knowing for sure that a certain thing is what it is? Is religion about gaining safety and certainty about the reality of God and man's salvation? What does a philosophical or theological study claim to achieve? Does it try to define a small area with certainty thereby cutting off a large number of possible areas of observation and thus diminishing experience rather than increasing it. Or could philosophy and religion be the means to give a sense of reality and life to man's thought and experience? Maybe it is from fear of losing control that we try to define things so that they all becomes static and dull. Maybe we should look for a positive life force within ourselves that knows it cannot be lost no matter how complex and rich reality is. We could then look for a sense of reality in an ever broadening or expanding acquaintance with reality. A sense of humility in life, I think, will allow the wonder of the immeasurability of our world to affect us in such a way that we will want to explore the richness rather than go for a limited world view with a few "certain" facts of life. When the Lord says, "He who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be lifted up" (Mt 23:12), I think it means that from a position of humility there will be nothing of self-pride or contempt to stand in the way of receiving again and again the wonders of life and creation. The realization that one is, in oneself, nothing compared with the limitless creation is an opening to seeing more rather than something that closes the view. See how children learn. They jump from one thing to another with the same sense of wonder and with an unabated enthusiasm.

Compare this theme of reaching out to broader areas of experience with the delimiting principles Descartes set up: "Those who seek the direct

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road to truth should not bother with any object of which they cannot have a certainty equal to the demonstration of arithmetic and geometry... If in the matters to be examined we come to a step in the series of which our understanding is not sufficiently well able to have an intuitive cognition, we must stop short there.”¹ If it is a matter of gaining control over a few facts of life, it must still be considered to be a “very great impoverishment” of the tools man has for gaining wisdom and happiness in life.²

But the question is how can we have an expanding approach without getting lost in imagination and false illusions? So, is there a way or method where there is a consistent way of expanding the thought and reaching into the unknown without losing touch with reality? Schumacher talks about “four levels of Being”: minerals, plants, animals and lastly human beings, and of a related progression of four elements from matter to life, to consciousness, and finally to awareness. There are “ontological gaps and discontinuities that separate the four elements from one another.”³ He argues that these elements must be recognized and studied, but that they cannot as such be explained.⁴ Still it is this “progression” that will lead to spiritual freedom.⁵ Compare this with what Swedenborg says:

All things of the earth are distinguished into three kinds, called kingdoms, namely, the animal kingdom, the vegetable kingdom, and the mineral kingdom. The things of the animal kingdom are correspondences in the first degree, because they live. The things of the vegetable kingdom are correspondences in the second degree, because they merely grow. The things of the mineral kingdom are correspondences in the third degree, because they neither live nor grow.⁶

This paper deals with icons as a religious art and Swedenborg’s ideas on what he calls the science of correspondences. I think that these two

¹E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 17.

²Cf. Schumacher, p. 19.

³Ibid., p. 35.

⁴Ibid., p. 34-35.

⁵Ibid., p. 39.

⁶*Heaven and Hell*, n. 104.

areas of thought and experience are close in approach and that they speak to the question of philosophy and religion as means of expanding one's sense of reality and the joy linked therewith.

ICONS IN RUSSIA

Russia became a Christian nation by an active choice in the late 10th century when prince Vladimir of Kiev converted to the eastern form of Christianity. It then spread to Novgorod and Moscow. The culture that was imported into Russia was "Byzantine through and through, yet with that plastic flexibility... which made it possible for that which was essentially an alien importation to be felt as native, and to take on gradually the qualities of the area into which it had been transplanted."⁷ It is important to see this heritage when we discuss Russian icons. Russian Christianity has always been in the "orthodox" tradition, the Eastern one, whereas the influence from Western Christianity has been very limited. When the split took place in 1054 there was no question which side the Russian Church took. And after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 the Russian Church became more or less the leading branch of the orthodox church, Moscow being called the "third Rome" and having its own patriarch.

All the time the Russian Church was faithful to its origins in the Byzantine Church. This is true also in the tradition of icon painting. Since this is the emphasis here, we will dwell on some major events in its development.

When Russia received a new, Christian culture around the year 1000, it received a mature, almost finalized tradition of icon painting. (To put it simply, the icons were painted removable wooden boards that were placed in churches built of wood. Only later on were the paintings made a permanent part of the church when they were built of stone or masonry.) "...[F]rom the very beginning, the Russians identified their faith with its external manifestations, its rites, and its artistic expression...[They] tried to recreate in their country the splendour they witnessed in the Byzantine worship...Greek iconographers were employed to decorate the new

⁷ S. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 89-90.

churches...What the Russians inherited from Constantinople was chiefly a *liturgical* tradition in which they saw Christ coming to them through word, image and sacrament."⁸ Later on Russia came to be the leading country of icon painting and the protector of the Byzantine tradition.⁹

Christian art had its roots in pre-Christian Roman and Egyptian traditions,¹⁰ and developed freely from there. The special technique of painting on wood stems from Coptic, Syrian and Palestinian traditions, and the oldest ones known today are from the 6th century.¹¹ It is, however, the next step in the development of the icon-painting that has to be pointed out. It is the well-known Iconoclasm during the period 724-843.

ICONOCLASM

The result of this controversy was that icon painting ever after was circumscribed by strict "rules" as to how to paint, how to arrange the objects in the picture, and what to picture.

As we said, when the Byzantine tradition came to Russia, these rules were already adopted and had by then been followed for more than 150 years. This I see as providential. It allowed this sacred art to be just that—a sacred art. At the end of Iconoclasm it was acknowledged as a sacred art, and as such it continued to be exercised. I think that without the terrible upheaval and heated, yes, violent and lethal debate about images or not, such a set of rules as we now have would not have been established, nor would such a strong imprint have been made on people's minds from that time and onward that icon painting has a sacred dimension. That is what I mean by "providential."

Clashes often lead to "isolation," i.e. to some people hanging on to a certain set of beliefs in order to reinforce that the clash and its victory were lived through for a higher reason. Another such factor adding to the "isolation" and therefore the preservation of traditions was the split be-

⁸Paul Meyendorff, "Reflections on Russian Liturgy," *Chrysalis* (Summer 1990): pp. 70-71.

⁹J. Schmidt-Voigt, *Russische Ikonen* (München: Verlag Karl Thiemig, 1978), p. 12.

¹⁰M. Gaugh, *Den Fornkristna Kulturen* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1963), pp. 92, 141.

¹¹Schmidt-Voigt, p. 9.

tween West and East in the Church as mentioned before.¹² As one author puts it: "The use of icons is a particularly unique example of a singular and ancient tradition that has been preserved. Without the Orthodox Church we would have totally forgotten this window to the spiritual..."¹³

To illustrate the point we can look at the development in the West. The Council that settled the issue of Iconoclasm, the Seventh Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in 787, was accepted by both the West and East, but whereas "in the East the prestige of...the Council was enormous...the Western Church (was) never fully capable of incorporating in its traditions the theology of the Eastern Church on icons."¹⁴

In the West the Council's decision was accepted more on practical grounds than on theological: "For them icons were necessary to adorn churches, i.e. they accepted an aesthetic criterion, but not the theological criterion of the necessity of preserving, in its entirety, the spirituality of worship through icons."¹⁵ It was a "merely secondary matter... A Council should deal with necessary matters of advantage to the faithful, but uncertain or undoubtedly useless matters must be passed over in silence as unworthy of the attention of a Council."¹⁶

Therefore the religious art in the West developed free from the rules adopted in the East. By the time Andrei Rublev painted his famous icon "Troitsa" (The Old Testament Trinity, early 15th century), painters in the West were entering the era of the Renaissance with its interest in the natural dimension of life, the aesthetic rather than the spiritual significance of natural objects. The Christ Child was depicted naked, something that never would occur to the Eastern painter, partly because it is not biblical. Later on the style in the Western tradition became sentimental

¹² Cf. D. L. Rose, "Russia and Atheism," *New Church Life* (Feb., 1963): pp. 76, 82

¹³ Wilson van Dusen, "Swedenborg and Eastern Orthodox Mysticism," *Chrysalis* (Summer 1990): p. 118.

¹⁴ V. I. Pheidias, "The Ecumenicity of the Seventh Ecumenical Council," in *Icons: Windows on Eternity—Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, ed. G. Limouris (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1990), pp. 17, 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁶ O. P., C. Schönborn, "Theological Presuppositions of the Image Controversy," in *Icons: Windows on Eternity—Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, ed. G. Limouris (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1990), p. 86.

rather than spiritual. The Nativity scene became “the Holy Family,” with Joseph and Mary standing together, whereas the eastern tradition always keeps Joseph separate from Mary and the Child.

In the Iconoclasm there were both genuine themes of theologically investigating the appropriateness or not of images in worship and in church buildings, and less genuine, i.e. political themes. There had by then been a long tradition of using images in churches and for private worship. “By 403 portrayals of Christ and the saints were widespread...By 400 the veneration of the Blessed Virgin was occupying a mounting place in private devotion that was soon to pass into the official liturgy.”¹⁷ At the same time there were many serious theologians who had a puritan view. To them there was too much of paganism and idolatry in the use of images.¹⁸

The Iconoclasm started when the emperor Leo III in 726 ordered “the destruction of the famous image of Christ above the Bronze gate of the imperial palace in Constantinople...He had that image replaced by the symbol of the cross.”¹⁹ He wanted to rid the empire of idolatry, seeing in the Bible that idolatry had been the downfall of many a king. He wanted a religious reform as a way of strengthening his empire by doing away with a destructive influence from idolatry. He convened a large Council in 754 and managed to get it to side with his iconoclastic ideal. Instead of grounding the arguments on the Old Testament (Ex 20:4) he made it a Christological issue. He argued: “Christ is *one*; he is one person in two natures, God and man. If one wants to make an image of Christ, what is to be depicted? His divinity? That is impossible because it is ‘uncircumscribed’, infinite. His humanity, then? But that would mean separating it from the divinity and consequently dividing Christ.”²⁰ Those in favour of images could only answer with one of two heresies and therefore kept silent. Either they had to say that only his humanity is depicted, which is the heresy of separating the human element from the Divine in Christ (Nestorianism), or they had to argue that the depicted Christ is God and man at the same time, thus

¹⁷ H. Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 281.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

¹⁹ Schönborn, p. 88.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

making the Divine and the humanity one and the same, which is another heresy (Monophysitism). The only escape the bishops had was to “recognize the mystery of Christ cannot be captured in human art.”²¹

The decision of the Council did not convince the Church. What followed were violent clashes between the camps. “The long and difficult resistance to the spread of Iconoclasm led to discrimination, persecution and martyrdom.”²² The iconoclast movement was based on an inconsistent programme. They could not show why images of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints should necessarily be equated with the idols of the pagan divinities. Nor could they decide when this illness started, and therefore could not find authority for supporting their actions.²³ This finally led to the defeat of the movement. “On the first Sunday of Lent 843 reinstatement of icons was solemnly proclaimed and this memorable Sunday has since been celebrated as the historical ‘triumph of Orthodoxy’.”²⁴

The principal argument of the defenders of images was that “to reject the icon is to reject the Incarnation.”²⁵ That seemed to become the accepted view, and therefore there was a sufficiently strong judgment on Leo’s initial deed of destroying the image of Christ that Iconoclasm would never more raise its head. The winning side would say that:

It is sufficient to see with a loving gaze the human face of God, the Word made flesh, to realize that the icon does not represent either the human *nature* or the divine nature, but the *divino-human person* of Christ. *The image makes it possible to meet that person..* The

²¹ V. Peri, “The Church of Rome and the Ecclesiastical Problems Raised by Iconoclasm,” in *Icons: Windows on Eternity—Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, ed. G. Limouris (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1990), p. 23.

²² Schönborn, p. 89.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 90f.

²⁴ T. Sabev, “Social and Political Consequences of the Iconoclastic Crisis,” in *Icons: Windows on Eternity—Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, ed. G. Limouris (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1990), p. 50.

²⁵ Schönborn, p. 91.

question of icons is so important because the Mystery which these images represent is the most important thing there is: the human Face of God.²⁶

Veneration of Icons

The result of the whole debate was that it is allowable to venerate images, but that it should not be believed that the image itself is holy. It is what it represents or evokes that is to be considered holy. From the Council text itself (the Horos) we quote:

The representation of painted images (is) in accord with the story of the biblical preaching, because of the belief in the true and non-illusory Incarnation of God the Word, for our benefit...The holy and precious icons painted with colours...should be placed in the holy churches of God...For each time that we see their representation in an image,...we are made to *remember the prototypes*, (and) we grow to love them more...For the honour rendered to the image goes to its prototype, and the person who venerates an icon venerates the person represented on it.²⁷

MATERIAL AND SPIRITUAL LEVELS

It is clear from this that it is not the material picture itself, the wooden board with a painted image, that is holy and is to be venerated, but it is what the picture evokes in the believer's mind.

It is obviously a very delimiting perspective to think that the material picture would be the same as the spiritual reality of which it is supposed to be a reflection. Man is a spiritual being. His mind is the living spirit, invisible in itself, clothed in the body he possesses. The material eyes of the body look at a material picture with an image of, say, Christ. But what

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91f.

²⁷ G. Limouris, "The Doctrine (Horos) of the Veneration of Icons as Formulated by the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787)," in *Icons: Windows on Eternity—Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, ed. G. Limouris (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1990), p. 1.

really happens is that his mind is perceiving an image that makes his inner being turn his attention to the living God, the spiritual essence that the natural, "dead," image is meant to evoke.

It is this relationship between the material and spiritual that set off the Iconoclastic debate. The same relationship is involved in *Swedenborg's Science of Correspondences*

Those in favour of icons argued that the material image was necessary for a deeper purpose, namely to see more of the spiritual reality represented in the material picture. "The image makes it possible to meet...Christ."²⁸ Exactly the same idea is set forth by Swedenborg. The lowest level of existence, the natural, is dead in itself, but it serves as a necessary foundation for the communication with and reception of the higher, living, realities, i.e. the spiritual. The two levels *correspond* to each other, or more exactly, the lower level corresponds to the higher level. Each level needs the other. The material level is dead without its connection with the spiritual, living level. But the spiritual could not be received without the material level serving as a foundation or receiver, and thereby representing the higher level. Swedenborg says that "the whole natural world corresponds to the spiritual world," and that "the natural world springs from and has permanent existence from the spiritual world, precisely like an effect from its effecting cause."²⁹ "All things that have existence in nature...are correspondences...because the natural world...springs forth and subsists from the spiritual world."³⁰ These quotations show that the "dead" nature has its life and existence from the inflowing "life" from the higher level. "The outmost (lowest) degree is the complex and containant of prior (higher) degrees, and prior (higher) degrees are in their fullness in their outmost (lowest) degree, for they are in their effect, and every effect is the fullness of causes."³¹ This means that the lower level is necessary for the higher level to be perceived. This same thought was expressed by a follower of the Orthodox faith: "...it is through the material that we come to the spiritual."³²

²⁸ Schönborn, p. 92.

²⁹ *Heaven and Hell*, n. 89.

³⁰ *Heaven and Hell*, n. 106.

³¹ *Divine Love and Wisdom*, n. 217.

³² H. D. Warren, III, "Sojourn in Paradise," *Chrysalis* (Summer 1990): p. 86.

From this more general idea of how the higher and lower, or spiritual and natural relate to each other, we must get back to the specific idea of what the role is of a painted icon.

A Fixed Foundation

When I called the formalizing of rules for icon painting “providential” I meant that a tradition was preserved in which, let us call it, a fixed foundation on the natural plane was established. It is this idea of fixity that is important. The object for meditation is the same and common to all who meditate on it, and from there the effect on each individual will be different because each one as to his spirit is different. Also, coming back to the same fixed object gives the individual an opportunity to see his own changes of mental or spiritual states. And thirdly it gives the Tradition a chance to converge on something held in common and watch itself in its development.

The value of this fixity is expressed by some American nuns who are devoted to icon painting. They were asked “how they found it possible to *work within the restrictions of creativity* that are part of the iconographer’s tradition. Their response repeated the paradox that ‘*limits are freedom*’, for restrictions on novelty guard against the painting of an individual vision, an ego-image, that may be inconsistent with the vision of the Christian community.”³³

This takes us to the question posed in the beginning of how we can gain experience and put meaning to our life without being subject to illusions. How can the limited object that we stare at generate a deeper understanding or vision that is genuinely spiritual and therefore transforming of one’s personality?

Spiritual methods

There are many “spiritual methods,” like prayer, meditation, reading of Sacred texts, religious ceremonies (liturgy), self-control etc. The aim of

³³K. Stannard, “The Once and Future Icon: An American Encounter,” *Chrysalis* (Summer 1990): p. 66, emphasis added.

religion or of using spiritual methods can be described in many ways. Commonly understood it would be on the one hand to overcome one's self (or ego) and so look towards what one can do for others rather than what others can do for oneself, and on the other hand gaining experience of more meaning in life or of one's life being part of a bigger whole. This latter thing can be described as becoming one with God, finding the meaning of life or as "a gradual widening and spiritualizing of the meaning of experience, (where) ordinary daily experience gradually becomes spiritual."³⁴

One such method is the use of icons. At the same time as they do have a cognitive message they, however, speak to a different part of our mind, maybe in a more holistic way. "They are a wonderfully direct antidote to the usual wordiness of religion."³⁵ They are meant to be windows into the unknown but more real and inspiring realm, and the fact that they are not naturalistic may actually help the worshiper to leave the worldly behind and open up to a perception of the spiritual. The icon is always part of a broader context, the liturgy. As such it is a means of enhancing prayer. A person's mind is focused on God and all that belongs to Him. The icon has a liturgical function. The mind is "not captured by the image" but leads on "to the prototype it is depicting and raises the mind to something higher."³⁶ "In the Orthodox tradition, icons are a kind of spiritual window between earth and heaven. Through the icons, the worshipping congregation contemplates the heavenly beings and establishes a spiritual link with them."³⁷

REPRESENTATIONS FROM HEAVEN

Our general theme is that earthly representations have a special function to serve, namely, to connect this world with the other. In that sense the

³⁴ Van Dusen, p. 116.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

³⁶ N. Ozoline, "Theology in Colour: the Icon of Christ's Nativity," in *Icons: Windows on Eternity—Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, ed. G. Limouris (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1990), p. 133.

³⁷ D-I Ciobotea and W. H. Lazareth, "The Triune God: the Supreme Source of Life: Thoughts Inspired by Rublev's 'Icon of the Trinity,'" in *Icons: Windows on Eternity—Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, ed. G. Limouris (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1990), p. 202.

word "icon" can be taken to mean more than what we think of as images painted on wooden boards.

Most of the representations on the traditional icons are taken from the Bible, especially the Gospels. If we extend that fact we can see how there is a potential of an almost limitless number of "icons" being images taken from the Bible, each one serving as a foundation for conveying a spiritual message. In a very interesting document from the time of Iconoclasm John Damascene (c. 652 - c. 750) comes to such a conclusion. He was the one "who provided the first extensive refutation of the iconoclastic position."³⁸ He gives all the penetrating arguments in favour of using icons. Then he dwells on the most obvious argument against icons, the prohibition in the Old Testament about "not making any carved image" (Ex 20:4). He is pointing out that the Law (the Pentateuch) actually has many commandments that tell the Israelites to make images. He especially directs attention to the making of the ark (for the stone tables) and its Cherubim (Ex 25:18), and also the Mercy seat, and from there he goes on to say that "indeed the very Tabernacle itself is an icon, i.e. a shadow and example of heavenly realities."³⁹ Having shown that the Law itself prescribes the making of images, he argues against the iconoclasts by saying that since God Himself is indescribable the Ark with the Cherubim, the Mercy seat "and indeed the whole Tabernacle" are representations of Him, i.e. "the icon of the divine mysteries." And from there he jumps to the conclusion that "the whole Law is an icon or foreshadowing...of heavenly realities," referring to Hebrews 8:5 and 10:1.⁴⁰

Hebrews 8:5 says that "Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the Tabernacle." This is referring to the text in Exodus 25:40 where it says: "And see to it that you make them according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain." (cf. Ex 25:9)

People in all times have acknowledged that the Word of God is holy because it is spoken by God. This common understanding is supported by Swedenborg, but he also explains in what the holiness consists. He says

³⁸ G. D. Dragas, "St. John Damascene's Teaching about the Holy Icons," in *Icons: Windows on Eternity—Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, ed. G. Limouris (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1990), p. 53.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

that it is the spiritual reality or power that resides invisibly within the external appearance of the Word of God that makes the Word holy.⁴¹ The external appearance is the literal sense, e.g. all the laws and regulations in the Pentateuch, including the instructions for the building of the Tabernacle.

SWEDENBORG'S THEOLOGY

In Swedenborg's theology the reality of the spiritual world is one of the primary concerns. The "heavenly kingdom" into which those who have lived according to the commandments come after the death of the body is a real world but spiritual. That we call heaven. However, there is also a likewise real abode called hell, where those who have lived against and confirmed themselves against the commandments end up. In the spiritual world man lives as before, but in a spiritual body, angels as well as devils. They think and will and act as before but in a spiritual reality, where spiritual laws govern their lives. We shall limit the focus in that what we say in the following only applies to heaven.

In this spiritual world there are "higher" and "lower" regions depending on how close the angels are to God. The closer they are, the wiser and more loving they are and the more perfect are their surroundings, because the perfection of their souls is reflected in beauty and perfection in their surroundings. All their wisdom, love and concern for others come from the Lord. The lower regions are as in shade compared with the higher regions. Here on earth man lives in darkness compared with angels. It is to lead man out of darkness that God gave His Laws to mankind, so that they could see their darkness and turn to the light. The first commandment must therefore be to abstain from doing evil, since evil has no part in a heavenly life. That is why the ten commandments are worded "you shall not..."⁴² The more man abstains from evil the more he will see what is good. Therefore there is an infinite progression into love and wisdom that lies open for everyone who wants to do the will of God.

⁴¹ *Sacred Scripture*, n. 4.

⁴² *Life*, n. 58.

Therefore there are spiritual ideas hidden within the relatively gross commands that are delivered in the Laws of Moses. If not in this world man or angel will see the finer ideas of neighbourly love when he studies these Laws.

Moses Receiving the Law

When Moses was instructed on the mountain about how to build the Tabernacle, he was not given to see the higher ideas themselves but was led to see a representation of higher ideas of life. What he saw was a spiritual representation in the lowest region in the spiritual world. This he saw with his spiritual sight opened.⁴³ In that spiritual representation was stored up all other more refined ideas of love and wisdom that angels are capable of receiving from God. Moses was told to make all things "according to the pattern which was shown on the mountain." (Exodus 25:40) About this Swedenborg says,

All these things are representatives such as continually appear before the angels in the heavens, and present in a visible form the Divine celestial things that belong to the good of love, and the Divine spiritual things that belong to the good of faith. The sum of such things was represented by the Tabernacle and the things that were in it.⁴⁴

The "pattern" was the lowest appearances of the Word of God, images of physical, material objects and words, just as we have them recorded in the Books of Moses. That "pattern" or the Word of God in its lowest (Swedenborg calls it "ultimate") form is what we call the sense of the letter of the Word. That sense is the foundation for the higher, hidden sense, just as matter is the foundation and basis for higher forms of life, like plants, animals and human beings.

⁴³ Cf. *Arcana Coelestia*, n. 9577.

⁴⁴ *Arcana Coelestia*, n. 9481:2.

THE REALITY OF THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

Those who live in the other world on that lowest level of heaven see such representations before their eyes. The origin of them is in the higher regions. When angels in the higher regions express their thoughts and affections about spiritual values so refined that the lower angels cannot comprehend them, they appear as such representations. They see houses, animals, plants, hills, lakes, people dressed in a variety of ways and so on. They are delighted to see these representations, because they know that there is something deeper, more refined and blessed within them, and it inspires them to think about love to the neighbour and how to be useful to each other. Swedenborg describes this in the following:

The angels who are in the ultimate or first heaven, constantly see forms of things like those which are in the world, such as paradises, trees therein with their fruits, flowers and plants, also houses, palaces and likewise animals of many kinds, besides countless other things which are not seen in the world. All these things are representatives of the heavenly things in the higher heavens, and which in the first heaven are so presented in a form before the eyes of the spirits below, that an angel can know and perceive from them everything that is coming forth in the higher heavens; for all things, down to the smallest particulars, are representative and significant. From this it can be seen what is meant by the representative of heaven and of the heavenly things which are signified by the ark, the cherubs, the Tabernacle, the table therein and the lamp stand.⁴⁵

The Descent of the Divine and the Ascent

Just as higher angels are “above” lower angels and see more, so the Lord Himself is “above” all of heaven and of course is seeing all, since all of Love and Wisdom comes from Him. Therefore there is a gradual descent of the Infinite Love and Wisdom that is in God, into heaven, into

⁴⁵ *Arcana Coelestia*, n. 9577:1.

the lower heaven, and finally into the images in the literal sense of the Word of God. In this gradual descent the Infinite heat and light that is in God is tempered and can so be received at different levels. In our world we receive the Divine heat and light, that is to say, the Love and Wisdom from God, through the Word of God, which is so covered by outward appearances of natural things that we hardly can see the Divine within.

When man lives according to the commandments, his spirit will be enlivened by the spiritual heat and light within the Word, which is the love and wisdom that resides within the shell, the literal sense. Swedenborg calls this the internal or spiritual sense of the Word. Therefore there will also be an ascent into the higher regions. Such an ascent actually takes place in this world, but it does not manifest itself clearly until in the next life when man leaves the limitations of the physical body.

When the external man apprehends the Word according to the letter, the internal man (the spirit) apprehends it at the same time according to the internal sense, although man while living in the body is not aware of this. Especially may this be seen from the fact that when a man comes into the other life and becomes an angel, he knows the internal sense as of himself without instruction.⁴⁶

Going back to the controversy of the icons, this is an exact reflection of the ideas in the "Horos," the Doctrine of the Veneration of Icons, agreed on in 787: "The honour rendered to the image goes to its prototype."⁴⁷

The main point to stress here in relation to icons is that an earthly object, i.e. a natural representation can be "a window on eternity," a means of reaching the depths of the soul.

When Moses received "the pattern" on top of the mountain, he was probably not aware of the incredibly deep signification of the images he was presented with. He may have marvelled at the sights he had, and would then faithfully have recorded them. The important thing for us to know is that he received exact images of what within them contained a

⁴⁶ *Arcana Coelestia*, n. 4280:3.

⁴⁷ See above, page 256.

wisdom that cannot ever be depleted. It is an infinite source of wisdom, and so is the whole of the Word of God.

This ties in with the problem raised in the introduction—how can we increase a meaningful understanding of life without being subjected to illusions? How can we at the same time be exact and expansive? The answer lies in the concept of a limited image containing within it an infinity of meaningful ideas to guide man on his quest for the wisdom that makes him a better human being.

However, there is more than a personal interpretation of the images. Concerning icons the Church Tradition leads the mind when it explores the depths of the icons. We shall now see how this relates to the images of the Word of God when the Science of Correspondences is applied.

THE SCIENCE OF CORRESPONDENCES

The subject of correspondences embraces the whole question of how the natural world relates to the spiritual world. This question has been discussed in philosophy from ancient times and on. The problem that has to be resolved is this: if the two, the spiritual and the natural, are completely different entities, how can they communicate; and if they do communicate, how can they be completely separate entities?

Swedenborg's answer is *correspondences*. There is what he calls a co-established harmony between the two worlds.⁴⁸ What goes on on one level has its corresponding activity on another level.

One example that comes close to illustrating the point is a radio and the emitted wave-length. In the air there are numerous programmes emitted at different wave-lengths. When we look at the air we cannot see them, nor hear them. They are fluid and invisible. The radio is fixed and visible and in itself a dead material object. Only when the radio receiver is in tune with the wave-length in the air will there be harmony, i.e. the receiver will vibrate in the same way as the wave-length and sound will be produced that has harmony, either speech or music. Only when there is this harmony can the higher level, the waves *flow in*. Both levels are needed. They

⁴⁸ *Economy*, Part II, p. 282f.

are in themselves completely different, or discontinuous or discrete realities. They have nothing in common until they get into harmony with each other. Then the harmonious vibrations or waves in the air are the same as the harmonious vibration in the metal in the radio that is receiving the emitted wave-length. The two harmonies are the same. They are *co-established*. The waves exist in an environment that is *distinct* from the radio receiver.

Here we have three key concepts in the science of correspondences: by means of correspondences (a co-established harmony) there is an inflowing (influx) through distinct (discrete) levels or degrees.

Nature is *distinct* from the spiritual. They are on distinctly different levels, unlike for instance water that is hot or cold according to a continuous scale. The spiritual *flows into* the natural and gives life to it. The life of the higher level acts upon the recipient entity of the lower level. "Being acted upon" is the same as being made alive by an inflowing force. But the inflowing force is of a different "quality" than the entity being acted upon.

It is because the lower level or entity *corresponds* to the higher level that the influx is made possible. If there is not a correspondence, then there is no influx.

There are three main areas where we can study the subject of correspondences, discrete degrees and influx. They are *Nature, man's mind, and Holy Writing*, that is to say the Sacred Scriptures (the Holy Writ).

Everything in *nature* has its origin in the spiritual world. All in nature needs heat and light to live. The spirit in man needs love and wisdom, and so there is a correspondence between heat and love, and between light and wisdom. And so with everything in nature there is a correspondence. A tree e.g. corresponds to perception. Think of how the branches reach out into finer and finer tentacles, and how they all serve to build the central trunk holding it all together.⁴⁹ Swedenborg says,

All things that have existence in nature...are correspondences. They are correspondences because the natural world with all things in it springs forth and subsists from the spiritual world, and both worlds from the Divine...Everything in nature that

⁴⁹ Cf. *Heaven and Hell*, n. 111.

springs forth and subsists in accordance with Divine order is a correspondence. Divine order is caused by the Divine good that flows forth from the Lord. It begins in Him, goes forth from Him through the heavens in succession into the world, and is terminated there in outmosts (the lowest level), and everything there that is in accordance with order is a correspondence.⁵⁰

In daily speech we talk about hearing and seeing as being the same as obeying and understanding. Therefore the physical eye corresponds to man's spiritual eye, that is his understanding, and so on. "These and many other expressions in the speech of men are from correspondences."⁵¹

Correspondence in *man's mind* is when a person wants to do what his inner voice, the conscience, tells him to do. The external part of him, his actions and speech, is then in agreement with and an instrument of his inner part. A powerful statement of when there is *not* correspondence is Paul's saying, "For the good that I will to do, I do not do, but the evil I will not do, that I practice." (Romans 7:19) But when man overcomes such resistance, then "man is in accordance with Divine order...So far as he is in love to the Lord and in charity towards the neighbour, his acts are useful, and they are correspondences, and through them he is connected with heaven."⁵²

The Sacred Scriptures

As we have already said, the *Sacred Scriptures* are Holy Writing because there is the Divine within them although not visible in its external appearance.

The internal sense in its essence is spiritual, and resides in the external sense which is natural, as the soul in the body. This internal sense is the spirit which gives life to the letter, and it can therefore bear witness to the divinity and holiness of the Word.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Heaven and Hell*, nos. 106, 107.

⁵¹ *Heaven and Hell*, n. 97.

⁵² *Heaven and Hell*, n. 112.

⁵³ *Sacred Scripture*, n. 4.

It is through correspondence that the Divine is present in the Holy Writ. The literal sense is the shell or the vessel, the lowest level being a recipient of the influx of the Divine through discrete degrees. To be exact, Swedenborg distinguishes between *three* discrete degrees called the celestial, the spiritual and the natural degree, and above all of them is the Divine of the Lord itself. One level acts on the next lower one and so on, from the Divine down to the lowest, the literal sense such as we have it in the Bible.

The style of the Word is such that there is holiness in every sentence, and in every word. Indeed, in some places in the very letters...From the Lord proceed the Celestial, the Spiritual and the Natural, one after another. What proceeds from His Divine Love is called the Celestial ...; what proceeds from His Divine Wisdom is called the Spiritual...The Natural is from both and is their complex in the ultimate (or lowest) degree...The Divine which descends from the Lord to men comes down through these three degrees, and when it has descended, it contains these three degrees in itself. Such is the nature of every thing Divine. Therefore when it is in its ultimate degree, it is in its fullness. This is the nature of the Word. In its ultimate sense it is natural, in its interior sense it is spiritual, and in its inmost sense it is celestial, and in each it is Divine...These three degrees are quite distinct from each other,...yet they make one by correspondences, for the natural corresponds to the spiritual, and also to the celestial...Since the Word interiorly is spiritual and celestial it is therefore written by means of pure correspondences...Although it appears ordinary in the literal sense, yet it has stored up within it Divine Wisdom and all angelic wisdom."⁵⁴ "The internal sense of the Word is in entire accord with what is in heaven."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *Sacred Scripture*, ns. 3, 6, 7, 8.

⁵⁵ *Heaven and Hell*, n. 104.

Decreasing Intensity

For each step downward there is a tempering and decrease of the Divine heat and light which is the source itself. If that were not the case man would be destroyed just as if the sun would fall down on earth. God's presence is always in accordance with man's ability to receive Him.⁵⁶ This gradual decrease in intensity can be compared with nuclear physics.

Atoms...are larger and weaker in their internal energy of motion than their constituent parts...Each layer is different...and provides the building blocks of the next outer and less energetic layer...Discrete degrees are characterized by a correspondence or functional relation between levels. For example, the atom has the function of being a building block of the molecule, while the much more energetic proton is building block of the atomic nucleus. The atom is therefore...a discrete degree higher than the molecule, and the proton is discretely higher than the nucleus.⁵⁷

Obviously the literal sense of the Word in this analogy is like the molecule, the less energetic element containing within it the more energetic elements. Swedenborg says that

The Word in its sense of the letter is in its fullness, its sanctity and its power, because the two prior or interior senses...are simultaneously in the natural sense, which is the sense of the letter," and that "the truths and good of the sense of the letter...are like vessels, and like clothing of unveiled truth and good, which lie concealed in the spiritual and celestial senses of the Word.⁵⁸

To use the analogy of the nucleus and atoms, the interior senses are more energetic because closer to God. When man lives according to the

⁵⁶ Cf. *Apocalypse Explained*, n. 412:16; *Heaven and Hell*, n. 350.

⁵⁷ G. Baker, *Religion and Science—From Swedenborg to Chaotic Dynamics* (New York: The Solomon Press, 1992), p. 78.

⁵⁸ *Sacred Scripture*, n. 40:4.

commandments his spirit is able to accept more and more of the interior light and heat, and he is raised up into the heavenly spheres as to his spirit. The literal sense is the entrance way. It is through that gateway that man is connected with God. It is through correspondences that this connection is effected. The natural in man, who sees the natural or external part of the Word of God, is acted upon from within the Word, from the higher levels which are closer to God, and those levels in turn are acted upon directly by God. The heat and light become stronger the higher up man's spirit is lifted. Each level corresponds to each other, and the influx of heat and light, that is, love and wisdom, becomes stronger and stronger. Since there are distinct or discrete levels there is no "overspill" from a higher level to the lower. The higher, "warmer" level cannot by sheer proximity heat up the next lower level. That is what the distinction or discreteness is all about. Only through one level corresponding to the other is the influx possible.

The Natural is a Foundation for the Spiritual

To sum it up, we can therefore say that the earthly level, the literal sense of the Word, from which the icon motives are taken, is the foundation in the natural world, where we live, for the higher levels to act on. The higher levels are present in the lowest and when man turns to the Lord for guidance and enlightenment there will be an ascent into the spiritual heat and light that reside within the external shell. The Word of God is a window on eternity and the means of connection with God.

Likewise is the icon, when meditated upon as a reflection of the Word of God "a shadow and example of heavenly realities."⁵⁹ Swedenborg says,

In every particular of the Word there is a spiritual sense and also a natural sense, for the Word was made to consist wholly of correspondences between natural and spiritual things in order that a connection of heaven with the world, or of angels with men, might thereby be effected."⁶⁰ "All the thought of angels is spiritual

⁵⁹ Dragas, p. 57.

⁶⁰ *Heaven and Hell*, n. 365:3.

while the thought of man is natural. These two kinds of thought appear diverse. Nevertheless they are one because they correspond.”⁶¹ When man reads the Word “the natural ideas of man pass into spiritual ideas with the angels without their knowing anything about the sense of the letter...And yet the thoughts of angels make one with the thoughts of men, because they correspond...This shows how heaven is connected with man by means of the Word.”⁶² “The internal sense of the Word is its soul and the sense of the letter is its body...The Word is a medium of connection of heaven with man and its literal sense serves as a base and foundation.”⁶³ “Everything man understands naturally, the angels understand spiritually. By ‘the new heaven and the new earth’ (Revelation 21:1) they understand a new church; by ‘the city Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven’ they understand the heavenly doctrine for the new church revealed by the Lord; by its ‘walls’ they understand the truths protecting it (and so on).”⁶⁴

AN EXAMPLE OF LOOKING AT ICONS FROM CORRESPONDENCES

Just to show how Swedenborg’s teachings about correspondences can elucidate the understanding of icons we shall give an example.

One of the most common icons is “Christ the Pantokrator” (Khristos vsederzhitel). Here we see the Lord in His majesty, and the two most prominent elements in this icon are His face and His right hand. (He also holds the Word in His left hand.) It looks simple, yet it comprises *all* of the Lord. The Lord is the source of all creation and of all re-creation or regeneration of man’s spirit. This source is nothing but His Love, and that Love reaches out in Divine Wisdom. The Divine Love is that “from which” creation begins, and the Divine Wisdom is that “by means of which” creation is ordered.

⁶¹ *Heaven and Hell*, n. 306.

⁶² *Heaven and Hell*, n. 307:2.

⁶³ *Heaven and Hell*, n. 307:3.

⁶⁴ *Heaven and Hell*, n. 307:2.

Swedenborg shows that the correspondence of "face" is the affections or the will, thus what a man loves. Hence in this icon the face of the Lord is an image of His Infinite Love that willed to create the world and to save mankind. "'Face' in reference to the Lord means the Divine Love, from which is Divine good in heaven and in the church."⁶⁵

The correspondence of "hand" is the power of truth coming from the will. Love cannot act unless it is given an acting agent, which is Wisdom. Love has power through Wisdom. Wisdom acts from Love. Therefore in the icon, the Lord's hand represents all His Wisdom with which He reaches out to sustain His creation and with which he guides the steps of man on his way out of darkness and into the light of heaven.

In this seemingly simple-looking icon all of the Lord's Being and Manifestation is expressed.

There are two things in the Lord, Love and Wisdom, and these two proceed from Him...Love in Him is Being (*esse*), and Wisdom in Him is Existence (*existere*). Nevertheless, there are not two in Him but one, for Wisdom is of Love and Love is of Wisdom, and from this union, which is reciprocal, they become one.⁶⁶

This is just a quick sketch and a brief example of how the science of correspondences can serve to enhance and deepen the understanding and appreciation of icons.

CONCLUSION

The problem the early church had was to decide to what extent earthly images could be of use in getting the worshipper closer to God. The solution was to say that "the honour rendered to the image goes to the prototype, and the person who venerates an icon venerates the person represented on it." Thereby they got away from the accusation that the image itself, the material surface on which the eye rests, would be holy in itself.

⁶⁵ *Apocalypse Explained*, n. 412:1.

⁶⁶ *Divine Wisdom*, nos. I:1, II:1.

This thinking is reflected in Swedenborg's way of introducing the concept of correspondences. The "earthly" image in his case is the imagery of the Sacred Scriptures. The literal sense is necessary and serves as a foundation, but within it there is the holiness of the Divine. This holiness will come to the pious person, when he reads the Scriptures and seeks to apply it to life. It is such a holiness that those who defended icons had in mind, a holiness that is not apparent in the material object.

In both case, with icons and with the literal sense of the Word they are like a window on eternity or heaven.

This also offers an answer to the question about enriching one's experience by both having a coherent conceptual framework for the thought, and from there to expand into a deeper understanding and interpretation of one's life experience. The conceptual framework, i.e. the science of correspondences, does not stand in the way of expansion but stimulates it, at the same time as the expansion is guided by principles and not led by an illusory light. About this Swedenborg says,

No one is able to see the spiritual sense except from the Lord alone, and unless he is in Divine truths from the Lord...Therefore, if a man is not principled in Divine truths...he may...falsify the truths...Lest therefore anyone should enter into the spiritual sense of the Word and pervert genuine truth...guards are placed over it by the Lord. Guards...are meant by the Cherubim.⁶⁷

Those guards will stop anyone from vesting a meaning from the Word that is simply not there. If anyone pursues the science of correspondences with false assumptions or with evil intentions, then he will certainly go into illusions.

Man can violate Divine truth if he has a knowledge of correspondences and by it proceeds to explore the spiritual sense of the Word from his own intelligence.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *Sacred Scripture*, n. 26.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

With the Revelation through Emanuel Swedenborg we have been given a tool to restore a living faith and a truly spiritual understanding of man and the world, but as in all philosophy and religion, it is only the pure in heart who will find the truth and not illusions, for truth without application to a useful life is not truth but something dead. □

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