

On the Need for a Living Orthodox Creative Tradition

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Creativity is a delicate and temperamental thing. If overindulged, it suffers from excess. If constrained, it responds in passive silence. If neglected, it departs from us taking with it answers to some of the most fundamental questions of our being. Yet, despite creativity's mutable nature, the Orthodoxy Christian has an obligation to nurture it, as it remains one of the most essential and immediate ways we have to glorify God.

From a Christian perspective, the fountainhead for all human creativity remains the Divine act of creation. Of all that we confess in the Nicene Creed, nothing is more fundamental to the faith than the affirmation of God as Primordial Artist: the "Maker of Heaven and the Earth, and of all things visible and invisible." The recurrent liturgical emphasis on God as the quintessential Creator obligates us to acknowledge the creativity of man as both a reflection of the image of God and an indispensable extension of our faith.

The moment that God willed us into existence, He gave to us an image of His own creative nature that manifests itself in three ways: love, discernment, and free will.

The first part of this image, love, can be considered the primary motivation for all creative activity. St. Isaac the Syrian reminds us that God's creative will emanates from His inherent goodness, "brought about with a love that cannot be measured."¹ And so, as we were created out of love, out of love do we also create.

But love, alone, is incapable of ensuring good creative fruit. For this reason God offers us a second portion of His image given to us in the form of discernment. Holy Scripture describes discernment as a type of wisdom enabling us to recognize the intrinsic virtue in what we do or create. The Book of Genesis repeatedly emphasizes the good that God saw in His creation. In realizing the creative image of God, we remain obligated to seek the good in our own creations, understanding that "good" is that which is pleasing to Him.

The final, and most fundamental, aspect of the creative image is free will. Without it there can be no creativity. Free will is essential because it gives us the option to choose right or wrong—to direct our creative aspirations to glorify the sacred or the profane. In choosing what is good, we show our love for God and also for one another. St. Paul writes in his Epistle to the Galatians, "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."² Without free will, it is clear that our actions can never be completely born out of love nor do they demand our own discernment. Without free will, we cease to be creative.

Creativity as an Act of Love

The urge to create is something seen even in the earliest years of childhood. A small child thinking of her mother might freely, of her own accord, make or draw something out of love. She might then decide that what she made is good enough to give

¹ Quoted in Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, *St. Isaac the Syrian: A Theologian of Love and Mercy*, http://www.worldapostoliccongressonmercy.org/IMG/pdf/Bishop_Hilarion_Alfeyev.pdf

² Galatians 5:13

it her mother as a token of her love. Out of this exchange a very special bond is forged and a union is created that words alone could never achieve. Although creativity may be a complicated thing, this kind of artistic offering remains simple and innocent. It is only when our thoughts and ideas become entangled with functionality, taste, culture, and a whole host of related concerns that we lose sight of why we create in the first place. It is a reciprocal act, to create something for someone whom we love, and who has loved us first.

To simplify the creative process, we need only to begin as the child did. As she saw her mother as someone to be cherished, so too must we understand God as someone to be worshiped, not simply as a theological concept that we convey in paint or through song, but as a Father to be loved and glorified. Were we as innocent as a child, creativity might remain a simple matter. Our human sinfulness, however, has brought us far away from the original image that God gave to us. Our creativity must thereby take on an added purpose: we must use this image to bring us closer to Him. Fr. John Meyendorff tells us that “we [Orthodox Christians] must be dedicated to the task of saving human beings from error, and not just maintaining abstract propositional truths. We must imitate their constant effort to understand their contemporaries and to use words and concepts which could truly reach the minds of the listeners.”³

Composers throughout history have employed music to bring people closer to God. We find a good illustration in the life of George Frederic Handel, the composer of *The Messiah*. This oratorio remains one of the most celebrated compositions of all time. It was said that Handel finished this three-hour work for choir and orchestra in just 24 days, suffering great tears of joy and sorrow throughout the compositional process. At one point in the writing process, the composer broke down in tears and exclaimed, “I did think I saw the heavens open up, and saw before me the very face of God Himself.” The overwhelming success of the London premiere brought him accolades from all walks of life. Audiences rose to their feet in honor of this newly-composed masterpiece. The nobility in attendance lavished excessive praise on the composer for his work. Responding to the irrepressible admiration of one particularly flattering patron, Handel responded rather unexpectedly saying, “I should be sorry if I only entertained ... I wanted to make them better.” Now while Handel was not an Orthodox Christian, his words should stand as the quintessential goal of every Orthodox composer. For sacred music to be truly exalted, for it to be considered truly “good” in the Biblical sense, it must strive to make the listener better. Likewise, to achieve any kind of success in his creative work, the composer of sacred music must seek first to save the souls of the listener.

This high calling—this redemption by aesthetic means, as it were—is not the talk of composers alone. The world remains perennially enamored with the question posed by a character in a Dostoevsky novel who asks if it is truly possible for the world to be saved by beauty. Can humanity ever be transformed through its appreciation? The answer, as the author goes on to reveal, depends upon the kind of beauty we seek. An Orthodox Christian would say that salvation is possible only if we seek the ultimate form of beauty which rests in God, not as a connoisseur, but as a participant in its very essence. We must, ourselves, become beautiful in the spiritual sense.

³ Fr. John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1978), 8.

Such a transformation requires first a belief in the saving potential of the creative act. To begin to acquire this, we need only to ponder the beautiful reciprocity of an artist simultaneously imitating and glorifying God through his creative work. The Church speaks of the light of holiness that radiated from the work of those hymnographers and iconographers who through their creativity found glorification and sainthood. Yet, their bodies of work were not simply products of their saintliness, but an actual means for their salvation.

Culture, Tradition, and Discernment

The Holy Fathers teach us that the Holy Spirit is the Source of intellect, providing inspiration for our creativity and wisdom to assess how it conforms to sacred tradition. Fr. John Meyendorff in his book *Living Tradition* says that to be “traditional” implies an imitation of the Holy Fathers in what he calls their “creative work of discernment;” that is, what they have determined over time to be virtuous and of good report. The word tradition originates from the Greek term *paradosis*. From an Orthodox Christian perspective, *paradosis* is not just an accepted practice or set way of doing things; it is an element of pervasive truth that shapes doctrine, worship, and faith in the daily life of the believer. Archbishop Kallistos Ware maintains that tradition is “not only kept by the Church, it lives in the Church.”⁴ We also understand that, while tradition does not change the ultimate truths of the Church, it does reveal them in ways that people can readily understand. In the liturgical arts, for example, tradition is the bearer of universal truth speaking with the aesthetic dialect of a given time and culture. Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna refers to this as a “cultural *paradosis*” which is essential to the life of the Church. It yields a form of “creative faithfulness” that, within an unchanging doctrine, “brings forth a variety of expressions that vary according to the culture and historic circumstances of the time.”⁵ It is this creative cultural elasticity that distinguishes Orthodox musical traditions from those of the West. For almost a full millennium, the Roman Catholic Church actively sought to standardize a unified chant tradition that they thought best reflected the idea of a single faith.⁶ The Orthodox, however, do not equate unified theology with unified aesthetics, and thus allows this single faith to find artistic latitude amidst a plurality of cultural expressions, both musical and visual.

We see this most clearly when we look at icons of a various Orthodox cultures. In comparing the schools of Russian, Byzantine, Georgian, and Romanian iconography, for example, the cultural watermarks identifying the icon’s respective ethnic heritage are immediately recognizable, even when their patterns and forms are essentially uniform from icon to icon. While we may prefer one style over another as a matter of personal taste, they all share a common sacred tradition. We should appreciate the creative elasticity that Orthodoxy allows her artists, for such license encourages the kind of harmonious union of faith and culture that has led countless souls to God.

History shows that when a civilization accepts Orthodox Christianity, it also

⁴ Archbishop Kallistos (Timothy) Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), 206.

⁵ Archbishop Chrysostomos, Bishop Auxentios, and Archimandrite Akakios, *Contemporary Traditionalist Orthodox Thought* (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1986), 68.

⁶ Various regional chant traditions like Ambrosian, Mozarabic, and Gallican were either suppressed or fell into disuse with the codification of Gregorian chant which dominated liturgical music in the West by the eighth century.

undergoes a kind of cultural “baptism” whereby its artistic offerings are illumined by the teachings of the faith. Iconologist Leonid Ouspensky underscores this in his book *The Theology of the Icon* where he writes, “the contemporary iconographer must rediscover the internal outlook of the iconographers of old and be guided by the same living inspiration. He will then find true faithfulness to Tradition, which is not repetition but a new, contemporary revelation of the internal life of the Church. Indeed, an Orthodox iconographer faithful to Tradition always speaks the language of his time, expressing himself in his own manner, following his own way.”⁷

Free Will and Creativity

While Ouspensky speaks of iconographers, he could have referred, perhaps even more convincingly, to composers, for liturgical sacred music has absorbed a people’s indigenous creativity in ways unmatched by any other artform. Surprisingly, much of the music of the early Church was open to improvisation, an understandable consequence of the imprecise notational methods of the day. Musicologist Johann von Gardner points out that even some of the earliest examples of *znamenny* chant reveal the intriguing possibility that there was much more creative variety in the chant than what was preserved in notational form.⁸ While today’s church musician would never feel bold enough to willfully stray from the musical score, it seems that such things were not uncommon centuries ago amidst an insatiable desire of the people to lend their creative voices to the Church.

The Russian city of Novgorod offers a model of this kind of richly creative Orthodox culture. The city’s geographic location made it a cosmopolitan center for trade, commerce, and education, providing a variety of influences that shaped the sacred art and music of the time. The city became well known for its new iconographic method that abandoned the Greek style of iconography in favor of softer facial features, longer proportions, and brighter colors. In music, the 16th century *demestvenny* chant appeared, offering a highly creative and festive contrast to the traditional *znamenny* chant ordinarily used in the services of the time. Unlike the more established forms of chant, *demestvenny* did not adhere to a specific set of tones. It featured a highly elaborate musical style and was performed mainly by trained singers on special feast days or ecclesiastical gatherings. There is wide speculation among musicologists that this chant was so inspiring that it led to the development of many other kinds of compositional styles of writing.

The case of Novgorod reveals the full extent of influence that the indigenous musical traditions had on the development of sacred music during certain periods. It is important to note that while the Russian Church actively resisted new modes of theology, she often permitted developments in music that allowed certain native styles to influence the *kliros* and choir loft in a very organic way. The 19th-century musicologist Stepan Smolensky attributed this to the character of the Russian people who were “strict, conservative, and consistent in their deep respect in preserving their creative traditions- but irrepressibly and infinitely inventive in their careful attention to

⁷ Leonid Ouspensky, *The Theology of the Icon Vol. 1*. (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), 14.

⁸ Johann von Gardner, *Orthodox Worship and Hymnography Volume 1* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980)

detail- as these people live with a insatiable desire for the constant freedom of artistic creativity.”⁹

But just as there have been times of great creativity that grew out the living tradition of the Russian Church, perhaps even yielding to certain excesses, there have also been times when creativity has been suppressed as a reaction to perceived excess. In such cases, preservation assumed a kind of artificiality as the creative voice of the people lost its freedom to speak.

We find one of the clearest examples of this in the Imperial Court Cappella of 19th-century St. Petersburg. During this period, a number of composers returned from their studies at Italian conservatories only to write sacred works that resembled operatic arias more than they did hymns. Composers like Dmitry Bortniansky and Alexey L’vov were fierce advocates for a return to simple prayerfulness to the church music. To simplify and “preserve” the chant settings of the church, L’vov set out to reform the music in an intransigent way. One of his most ambitious efforts involved the setting of chant melodies into four-part harmonic models rooted in the theoretical rules of the Lutheran chorale. While these rules were theoretically sound and easily standardized, they offered little room for creativity of any kind. The efforts to “fix” the state of music in the Church, however well intended, eventually led to a diminished period of church composition where the performance of an unapproved composition could warrant an unpleasant visit by the police. The reforms exemplified in the first L’vov *Obikhod* of 1848 certainly succeeded in eradicating the more theatrically minded sacred works of the time; but sadly, they also purged the inspired sublimity, which is so essential to the transformative power of the Russian Orthodox aesthetic.

For our purposes, the state of sacred choral music in 18th and 19th century Russia offers two very germane examples of how an incomplete image of God’s creative will can have a pernicious effect on the aesthetic life of the Church. On one hand, the late 18th-century marks a period of excess where a lack of discernment informed by the sacred traditions of the Church brought forth a period of self-indulgent liturgical singing styles. On the other hand, the strict reforms of the early 19th-century show an equally problematic disregard for creative free will leading to a fairly insipid period of compositional activity. Ultimately, we must understand that for creativity and faith alike, free will underscores the existence of choice. If the ability to choose does not originate within, if what we believe or create is forced from an outside dictate, neither can be said to have originated from love, and neither reflects fully the image that God has given to be creative beings.

The Living Creative Tradition in Orthodox West

In most cases, time reveals the reasons why things were done a certain way, and discernment successfully filters out the creative mistakes of the past. Yet, the Orthodox experience in the West is unique in history, and we find very few parallels that would help guide us in our future creative endeavors. We hold to a faith that has been transplanted into a culture that knows very little, if anything, about it.

The past tells us one thing for certain: what a culture contributes to the faith in the

⁹ Smolensky quoted in Olga Dolskaya-Ackerly’s *Aesthetics and National Identity in Russian Sacred Choral Music* <http://www.synaxis.info/psalom/research/archive/dolskaya/dolskaya.pdf>

way of creativity is in many ways a reflection of its own spiritual health. Where a people focus their creative energies reveals the centrality of their faith and what they cherish most. It should not surprise us that times of great piety are also times of great artistic vitality, as they are mutually supportive. Archbishop Chrysostomos reminds us that Orthodoxy is “at once a human culture and a divine manifestation. No single culture serves itself, but serves to express the eternal Orthodox Culture.”¹⁰ Yet in the West, the Orthodox, it seems, too often gravitate toward the pragmatic aspects of liturgy at the unfortunate expense of the aesthetic and creative dimension. We in English-speaking parishes worry about language, ethnicity, translation, and how we maintain every rubric of our prescribed services; and yet do we recognize the saving grace that God has imparted to us through the creative act? We should recall the words of Fr. Seraphim Rose who said, “How much our American Orthodoxy needs more heart and not so much mind!”¹¹

The Apostle James warns us that faith without works is dead.¹² If we acknowledge creativity to be a type of faith in action, how much more urgently should we seek out God through our artistic gifts? By relying only on the creative traditions of the past, we fall into the trap of what Jaroslav Pelikan calls the “dead faith of traditionalism [which]... supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time.”¹³ It is not simply enough to acknowledge that creative freedom exists; we must actively embrace and live it through our actions, putting aside self-doubt or fear. The Church, in her wisdom, will ultimately judge the virtue of our efforts through the great filter that we call sacred tradition. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn rightly concludes, “a work of art bears within itself its own confirmation: concepts which are manufactured out of whole cloth or overstrained will not stand up to when they are turned into images; they will fall apart and turn out to be sickly and pallid and convincing to no one. Works steeped in truth and presenting it to us vividly alive will take hold of us, will attract us to themselves with great power- and no one, ever, even in a later age, will presume to negate them.”¹⁴

All humans are granted the gift of creativity in some fashion; our goal should be to discover what it is that we can create for the Church. If we do not create things for the glory of God with gifts that He has given us as singers, composers, seamstresses, florists, or some other equally important vocation, undoubtedly we have, indeed, buried the proverbial talent and given back only that which God has given to us from the creativity of the past. If we impart to the next generation only the knowledge of those choral works which we ourselves were given, or if only sing with the voice with which we were born—full of potential, but never realized—what then shall we offer in our defense when we are asked what few things we have been faithful over? If we only venerate the icons of a former era, what does that say about our present one?

¹⁰ Archbishop Chrysostomos, Bishop Auxentios, and Archimandrite Akakios, *Contemporary Traditionalist Orthodox Thought* (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1986), 69.

¹¹ Fr Seraphim Rose, *Letters from Father Seraphim: The Twelve-year Correspondence Between Hieromonk Seraphim Rose and Father Alexey Young* (Richfield Springs, New York: Nikodemos Orthodox Publication Society, 2001).

¹² James 2:26

¹³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 65.

¹⁴ Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *Beauty Will Save the World: The Nobel Lecture on Literature*, 1970. excerpts reprinted at <http://www.mro.org/mr/archive/24-2/articles/beauty.html>

As we focus on bringing Orthodoxy to those in the West, let us not forget the importance of a creative culture and how we can foster its development. We must employ iconographers, not just icon print shops that replicate the creativity of the past. We must support and send our youth to specialized music workshops and activities where they can learn the music traditions of our faith and become future creators themselves. Above all, we must implant in our children a love for the Church and her creative traditions. We must teach them to see the beauty of God's creative image in nature and in our own creative works. We should encourage them to cut flowers and place them on our icons; to draw pictures of our Lord, the Mother of God, and the saints; to sing hymns; and to create things that glorify God and the Church.

God has given us, through His creative image, a mind that can conceive of things out of nothingness—to create art and music out of light and sound. He gave us voices to sing in a whole spectrum of notes and keys. He gave us the whole theory behind tonal music and its harmonic makeup which resonates throughout the natural world in mathematical proportions and ratios. He gave us these things that we might draw closer to Him. The Church has glorified some of the greatest creative minds in history, not because they were great martyrs, evangelists, ascetics, or healers, but because they lived out the faith using their artistic gifts to glorify God.

Some have said that all the prayers necessary for our salvation have already been written, and that we should focus instead on preparing ourselves. While this may or may not be true, it is clear that the same cannot be said of creativity. Man's creative activity is never truly finished in his lifetime. There will never be a time in this age when we can say that we have created enough. This is because the working out of one's salvation is not found in the product of creativity alone, but in the very act of creating. We should not hesitate to exercise our God-given free will to this end. Solzhenitsyn rightly concluded, "Art is not desecrated by our carryings-on. It does not lose sight of its own origins because of them. And each time and in each mode of use it sheds on us a portion of its secret inner light."¹⁵ Let us find the inner light that shines on our generation and is so needed in these troubled times. Let us find the great blessings that lie waiting to be uncovered by our own creativity through the image of a creative God. May He who gave us this image also give us the strength to engage the process freely, with love, discernment, and an unfailing trust in His ineffable mercy and goodness.

This article was based on a lecture given at the ROCM Conference in Toronto, Canada, October 2012.

¹⁵ Ibid.