

J. Reimer

THE SPIRITUALITY OF ANDREI RUBLEV'S ICON OF THE HOLY TRINITY

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the work of Rublev who is considered to be the greatest medieval Russian Orthodox painter of icons and frescoes and whose work has influenced generations of Russian artists, theologians, writers and philosophers. It examines Rublev's spirituality, both historically and theologically, with specific attention to the Icon of the Holy Trinity which is considered to be his most important work.

1. THE MAN AND HIS WORK

Andrei Rublev¹ is considered to be the greatest of all Russian Orthodox medieval painters of icons and frescoes. He was born in either 1360 or 1370. His place of birth is unknown. In fact, little is known about his life. Orthodox historians believe he was a monk of the monastery founded by the famous monastic father Sergii Radonezhski,² who died in 1392 and who was succeeded by Nikon of Radonezh. It is believed that Nikon was Andrei Rublev's spiritual father.³

Rublev's name was first mentioned in 1405 as one of three artists who decorated the Cathedral of the Annunciation in Moscow's Kremlin. The other two masters were Theophanes the Greek and Prochor of Gorodets. Both are well known in Russian religious history.⁴ Rublev is mentioned last on the list, which is an indication of his relative youth and, probably, his monastic status. According to Russian chronicles, Rublev also painted icons and frescoes in the

1 Also: Andrei Rublev, Andrey Roublyov. In Russian written as Андрей Рублёв.

2 For more information on Sergii, the foundation of the monastery and his spiritual legacy, cf. Reimer (1996:157-173).

3 There are a number of publications on Rublev, his life, art and theology. Cf. e.g., Demina (1972); Ilyin (1976); Pulunin (1974); Popova (1980); Sergejev (1981); Uspenski (1989); Ulyanov (2005) etc.

4 See Ilyin (1976); Popova (1980).

famous Assumption Cathedral of Vladimir (1408) and in the Cathedral of the St. Trinity in the Troitse-Sergieva Lavra in Radonezh (1425-1427). Rublev's last work was for the Andronikov monastery in Moscow. He died at Andronikov Monastery on 29 January 1430. Historians have, however, questioned this date.

Rublev's art has influenced generations of Russian icon painters. Rublev's style of icon painting was declared as a model of Russian Orthodox sacred painting at the Church Council (the famous Stoglav Sobor) in 1551.⁵ The Russian Orthodox Church finally canonised Andrei Rublev in 1988, the year of the Church's millennium celebrations, thus emphasising the importance of his work in Russian Orthodox spirituality. The Church celebrates his memory on 4 July.⁶



5 See the full text of the council in: <http://nesusvet.narod.ru/ico/books/stoglav.htm>.

6 In 1959 the Soviet government established a Rublev Museum in the Andronikov Monastery of Moscow. The museum introduces visitors to the art and work of the master and to the spirituality of the monks of the Sergi Radonezhski era. In 1966 Andrei Tarkovsky made a film on Rublev. For more information on Rublev and for a bibliography of sources on the interpretation of Rublev worldwide, cf. Tamcke (1994:908-911).

2. RUBLEV'S ART OF ICON PAINTING AND THE ST. SERGIUS SPIRITUALITY OF RADONEZH

Rublev's spiritual life was formed under the influence of the Monastery of the Holy Trinity in Radonezh. Founded by St. Sergius of Radonezh (1313/14 or 1321/22-1392), the place was, for centuries, a centre of Orthodox monastic spirituality. St. Sergius escaped the turbulent life of political strife and rivalry between Russia's feudal families and built his monastery in the seclusion of the Radonezh forest. Fascinated by the unity and peace of God, as presented in the theology of the Trinity, Sergius devoted the place to the Holy Trinity. Consequently, the monks expressed and lived the ideas of fraternity and brotherhood, calm and peace, love of God and the neighbour, and, above all, a spiritual perfection and self-improvement. In Radonezh the monastic brothers found peace from the political and social turmoil of the times. St. Sergius lived as an ascetic, adhering to the tenets of Gregory Palamas's monastic school of Hesychasm, but this did not separate him from the Russian nation. Deeply involved in the destiny of the Russian people, he called for unity among the feudal rulers, and condemned strife. His main political message was one of liberation from the Mongols. No other Russian Orthodox saint has been more praised and emulated than St. Sergius. His *vita* was first recorded by one of his followers, the Moscovite Epiphani the Wise, in the years 1417-18, shortly after Sergius's death.

The theology of St. Sergius is deeply rooted in the Trinity. Sergius found the basic theological foundation of unity and power, harmony and peace, and the dynamic of a divine intervention in the Trinity. Epiphanius the Wise wrote that the monastery was founded so that "contemplation of the Holy Trinity would conquer the hateful fear of this world's dissensions" (cit. Dunayev). St. Sergius's theology is deeply missionary, as indicated in the missiological analysis of his life. He seeks the salvation of the individual, a theotic transformation in God's image driven by the idea of a possible *theosis* of humankind. Salvation of the individual leads to the mission of service to the neighbour, the people and the nation. And this requires full dedication, an offering of oneself for the sake of others. In other words, *kenosis* precedes *theosis*. The mission of God into the world is a kenotic action and aims at the spiritual enlightenment of the land and its people. For St. Sergius, the missionary transformation started in the quiet, personal devotion of the believer before God. He regarded the Eucharist as the best place for such a meditative empowerment. The presence of the Holy Spirit was experienced in the Eucharistic community where the faithful believer received the inner light, the hesychastic Light of Tabor, a prerequisite of *theosis*.

In his art, Rublev combined the asceticism of Russian monasticism, as best expressed in the life and work of Sergius Radonezski, and the classic harmony of Byzantine iconography. His characters seem frozen in deep spiritual peace. An inward movement is assumed. His paintings are ruled by a "holy calmness."

A detailed analysis of his art, as illustrated in the Icon of the Holy Trinity, will show how his art is dependent on the hesychasm of St. Sergius.

3. THE ICON OF THE HOLY TRINITY

The most famous of all Rublev's paintings, and the only one that is fully authenticated, is the Icon of the Holy Trinity (Nikiforov 2001:619). It illustrates the Old Testament story of Abraham's three visitors (Gen. 18:1ff.), known in Russian Orthodoxy as "Hospitality of Abraham." Rublev may have painted this icon in 1425 (Dunayev) for the St. Trinity cathedral of the St. Sergius monastery in Radonez'.⁷ By this time he had access to St. Sergius's *vita*. Rublev not only dedicated his icon to St. Sergius, but also attempted to combine the best of St. Sergius's theology into one iconical image. The icon represents a *summa theologia* of St. Sergius as perceived by Rublev and his contemporaries. To understand Rublev we must understand St. Sergius. The icon gives us a better understanding of what made St. Sergius the father of Russian Orthodoxy which, for centuries, determined the destiny of a nation. The meaning of this painting for Russian spirituality cannot be overestimated.

The icon exemplifies Rublev's genius in that the painting itself is permeated with spirituality. The icon literally produces a lyrical aura of harmony and quietness while it seems to invite a rhythmic movement of an unstoppable power. Nikiforov wrote, "In the rhythmic movements of the characters presented in the icon lays the fascination of the icon and its composition" (Nikiforov 2001:619). Rublev's icon is a perfect composition. Every detail has meaning. To remove one of them means to harm the total meaning of the icon.

The subject of the icon is based on the Old Testament narrative of the three angels from God who visit Abraham and Sarah to announce the birth of their son, Isaac (Gen. 18:1-2). The Biblical story is carefully depicted. In the Orthodox tradition, the angels are believed to be the three persons of the Holy Trinity: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Rublev was by no means the only person to use this Old Testament narrative for an iconographical image of the Trinity. The first iconographic paintings of this narrative date from the fifth century onwards.⁸ But his icon is in many ways different from its Western and Eastern iconographical parallels, all of which seem to portray the narrative itself and be "overloaded" with the details of the story. In Rublev's masterpiece the original Old Testament narrative is removed to a barely recognisable background. There is a little house over the angel on

7 The icon is preserved in the Tretiakov Gallery of Moscow.

8 Cf. in this regard Rauschenbach.

the left, a tree over the angel in the centre and a mount over the head of the angel on the right. The observer who is familiar with the narrative will imagine the Biblical scene of Abraham's house at the Mamre tree with a view of the mountains of the Judean desert. But this background seems to be of no importance in Rublev's icon. Instead, the narrative is dissolved in the story's higher meaning. Rublev seems to apply an allegorical reading of the narrative. Florensky is correct in stating that the icon

... does not illustrate the story at Mamre. The story itself is rather rudimentary. The icon presents a surprising vision of the Holy Trinity itself — it is a new revelation, even if embodied into an earlier revelation of the Trinity, which, without doubt, seems of less importance in form (Florensky in Raushenbach).



Rublev: The icon of the Holy Trinity

Rublev reads the character of the Trinity in this story, reflecting the influence of the New Testament. Orthodox fathers saw the Abraham narrative as a revelation of God's Trinity, on account of the voice from heaven, which indicates the Son (Mt. 3:16-17). It is on the basis of this passage that Dunayev read the Old Testament from the perspective of the New Testament. To him God's three angels in Genesis 18 reflect the three persons in the text of Matthew 3 (cf. Dunayev).

Rublev paints his icon as a Russian, Eastern Orthodox iconographer. Unlike West-European, Roman Catholic iconography, which seeks outward expression and tends to be more naturalistic,⁹ the Russian masters expressed eternity by excluding movement. All energy seems to be concentrated on an inward perspective. The iconographer moved from the outwards to the inwards. To depict the hidden beauty of the heart and soul of the matter was more important than to grasp the natural expression. In this respect, Rublev's icon is typically Russian. All movements are frozen in an eternal moment. The painting conveys a deep, quiet peace and calmness.

One more structural observation is important for our understanding of the icon. Iconography as a sacred art follows strict standards. In Rublev's time, two traditions of painting the Trinity were accepted and ruled the day. Both of them were based on the teachings of the Church Fathers (cf. Ratner). The first may be called a "Christological type" in which the icon is arranged around the central angel, representing Jesus Christ. His figure is overwhelmingly larger than the other two, and his face is turned to the observer. He dominates the composition. The Trinity was perceived in Christ and in Christ only. The faithful observer came to the triune God because s/he had come to Christ. This is the oldest iconographic tradition. In the younger tradition, the "Trinitarian type", the three angels are painted on equal terms. In this icon the angels' clothing and gestures indicate the relationship between them. All three face the observer who is confronted with three faces at which s/he marvels. Rublev changes the composition entirely. It appears that he uses elements of both types, but his arrangement takes the observer inside the icon. The figures do not face the observer at all. Rublev paints his icon from a reversed perspective. The central angel approaches the table, not the observer. In an Orthodox Church arrangement, the priest approaching the table of the eucharistic offering faces the altar, turning his back to the people. In this instance the observer finds him-/herself behind the altar in the holy of holies. Rublev obviously seeks to allow his viewer an inner perspective on the Trinity, to see God in his very being rather than marvel at his outward deeds and historical appearance. Rublev wants to convey a mystical experience. The observer is invited to enter the window into eternity, to step into the icon and to discover God himself.

9 In order to understand the differences, cf. Uspenski (1989); Lazarev (1983); Ouspenski & Lossky (1947).

The three angels are an image of God in his Trinity. The faithful observer is supposed to read God in the icon's form, colours and figures. How does the artist achieve his goal? What composition does he create and which colours does he use? The author's first surprising decision is the cyclical arrangement of his figures. The angels are part of a cycle. In Eastern iconography, a cyclical positioning of iconic images in square formats was unknown prior to Rublev's time. Rublev was the first to combine the composition of a cycle with a square format. In Patristic theology the cycle and, in particular, cyclical movement was viewed as an expression of eternity, as noted in the writings of Dionysius Areopagites.¹⁰ The eternal peace, expressed by the three angels, composes a perfect cycle, one that seems to indicate God's everlasting love. Dunayev states, "The truth which the icon expresses best is the beauty of God's love" (Dunayev).

The analysis of the individual characters in the icon supports this view. God the Father is presented by the angel on the left as is clear from the house above his head that symbolises the house of creation. God the Father is the Creator of the universe. The two other angels bow before him. The angel in the centre represents Christ as is obvious from the tree above him. The tree represents the cross and the redemptive work of God the Son. The mount above the third angel points to the Holy Spirit. Mountains symbolised spiritual upliftment in both the Old and the New Testament (cf., e.g., Ps. 121:1f.).

The three angels sit around a table of offerings. It is not a dining table as in the Old Testament story. Instead, the table is clearly identified as a sacred table of offering with a cup in the middle. The head of the Lamb in the cup points to the New Testament image of the Lamb of God, who sacrificed himself for the sins of humankind (Phil. 2:5-11).

It is not too difficult to discover a eucharistic meal in the image of the icon. The three angels appear to converse over a secret meal which is their offering. The form of the image clearly indicates this. The two angels on each side of the icon form, with their bodies, handles, that lift up the cup which embraces the central angel. The conversation at the table is concentrated on a matter which involves the three directly. The faithful observer is reminded that the divine salvation of humanity in Christ is the work of the whole Trinity. The centrality of Jesus is embodied in the totality of God.

The gestures in the image support such a reading. The hand movement of the left angel (the Father) points to the cup, calling the Son to take upon himself the work of salvation, while the head of the central angel (the Son), gently bowed to the Father, indicates faithful and total obedience. The gesture says, "Not my, but your will be done" (Mt. 26:39). The third angel witnesses the holy act of divine self-dedication.

10 Cf. in this regard Dunayev, who quotes Areopagites as one of possible sources of Rublev. About the teachings and life of Dionysios, cf. Müller (1990).

His total appearance reminds us of a comforter, the Paraclete, who will comfort the faithful wherever they are and whatever they do in the Name of the Almighty.

The icon includes a wonderful arrangement of light and colour. The angels “light up” from the inside. They are the sources of light for the rest of the icon. In an impressive artistic effect, the observer is given the impression of light falling from the icon on him/her. It is striking that all three persons are painted equal. For the Orthodox theology of the Trinity, this was an astonishing decision on Rublev’s part. The icon does not carry any hierarchical imagery. The three are one in totality. Divine unity is obviously at the centre of Rublev’s theology. This is what he wants the faithful observer to see and believe.

This complete unity is expressed in extraordinary human categories. The image does not portray any movement or noticeable earthly energy, yet the forms suggest a deep relationship of love. There is no cold spirit of an abstract reality far removed from the humane. The opposite is true. The three perfectly relate to one another, creating a cycle of perfect love. Vzdornov (1981:205ff.) sees in the image of the icon a striking balance between soul and spirit, the bodily and the immaterial. The persons appear to the observer as quiet and gentle, while possessing a tremendous inner energy. There is a typical Russian anxiousness and sorrowfulness in their expressions; they invite us to meditate, contemplate and foster an intimate relationship with God. At the same time there is a powerful missionary energy that invites us to enter the “battlefield of life” with the message of the cross and the resurrection.

4. THE THEOLOGY OF THE ICON OF THE HOLY TRINITY

What is the theology behind the icon? What did Rublev want to transmit to the visitors of the cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Radonez? What is his message? There are a number of possible answers to these questions.

First, Rublev seems to express the unity, the divine oneness, of the Trinity. Both the composition of his icon, as well as the conversational relationship of the three angels as its main images strongly support this thought, as indicated previously. The oneness is a qualitative unity. It describes the nature of God in missionary terms. Uspenski formulates:

If the bowing of heads, expressed by the two angels towards the third unite the three, then the hands pointing to the cup on the white throne-like table with an Eucharistic cup filled with the head of an animal offering, point to the centre of the icon (Uspenski in Raushenbach).

This centre is the Eucharist, God’s salvific act in Christ, the ultimate target of the *missio Dei*. The unity of God is therefore qualified by the unity in God’s mission. In fact, the mission seems to determine the nature of the Trinity.

Secondly, Rublev emphasises the eternity of the Trinity by freezing all motions in his painting. By doing so, he seems to stop time itself. Time is taken out of the icon. What is left lies beyond time and space — eternity. His icon speaks, but instead of words and stories, it uses meditation, emotions, as if the author wanted to say, “You cannot describe God’s divine nature, his everlasting love and his self-denial in mission in words. Love must be experienced. Verbal debates lead nowhere. God must enter the inner room of our heart — intellectuality alone, reflection in time and space, do not enter his nature. Instead, they may well hinder access to the most secret, the most intimate — God himself in His Trinity.”

One is clearly reminded of God’s prohibition against making any likeness of him (Ex. 20:4). It is fascinating to see an image of God that expresses God’s law prohibiting such an image. Rublev does not offer an idol; he leads us to a deep contemplation of the unseen.

Thirdly, the unity of the Trinity is specified by some differentiations between the three images. Rublev does so by painting the dress of the angels differently. Their attire seems to indicate different responsibilities, different offices. They are one, their mission is one, centred on salvation, but their tasks are different. As indicated by the symbols above their heads, they each play a different role, yet without being separated from each other. They “promote” each other. Their acts seem to draw them into their eternal oneness. The positions of their bodies have the same effect. The three all sit differently, but again the bodies seem to enter a perichoretical¹¹ movement, a round dance, a rotation which, if speeded up, will make it impossible to distinguish who is who in the picture. The observer following the direction in which the bodies point will rotate his/her head and the ensuing meditation will produce a dancing effect. Rublev sees the differences in the hypostasis of the Trinity. But he does so as John of Damascus (675-749) once suggested — perichoretically. It is impossible to separate one person of the Trinity from the others. They naturally belong together. There is just one being. The three are one. All polytheistic tendencies are removed. Rublev is, in his icon, absolutely monotheistic.

Fourthly, at the centre of the icon is Christ. He reveals God to humankind. It is his salvific act which allows the observer to meditate on the nature of the Trinity. The quiet conversation, the presupposed dialogue between the three persons, seems to rotate around the table with the cup of offering. The conversation, frozen in time, indicates an eternal, never-ending dialogue. The Word is not only spoken by God, God himself is this Word. His nature is focused in this dialogue. Rublev wants his observer to see this. The attention of the observer is drawn to this table. The angels to the left and right seem to lift the table with their bodies that are “painted into” the table. The composition indicates that the

11 *Perichoresis* — Greek for a round dance, a never-ending movement.



John of Damascus

two offer up the third. It is him whom they want to be seen. Rublev seems to indicate what the Prologue of the Gospel of John expresses clearly in unforgettable words,

In the beginning there was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things came into being by Him; and apart from Him nothing came into being. In Him was life and the life was the light of men ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory (Jn 1:1-2:14).

Fifthly, the colours of the icon are consciously chosen. Rublev uses a mixture of deep blue and dark red in a combination which allows him to create the impression of light shining out of the icon. According to later interpretations, the intentions of an icon were to create a place of divine meditation which would allow the observer to enter the divine light of God in order to experience an inner transformation. The idea behind this comes from the hesychastic movement in Greek monastic circles, around the monk of Athos and later archbishop, Gregory Palamas, the founder of Hesychasm.¹²

12 Cf. Meyendorff (1964). The works of Gregory Palamas have been translated into English. Cf. the link on full bibliography: <http://www.ellopos.net/blog/?p=87>. On the reception of Hesychasm in Orthodoxy of the fourteenth century, cf. Clucas (1985).



Gregory Palamas

Gregory and his followers believed that the experience granted to the three disciples of Jesus, who went with him to Mount Tabor, the Mount of Transfiguration, meant that they were transformed by divine light, which they called the taboric light (Tabor light).¹³ Both Rublev and his spiritual father, St. Sergius of Radonezh, were hesychasts. The icon in their teaching becomes a window to God's divine light — the light of Tabor. Rublev aims to paint such a window. His task was more than merely producing an image of the Holy Trinity. In the hands of Rublev the icon becomes a place of divine inspiration and a materialisation of God's presence. Meditating on the content expressed by the icon allows the observer to enter a holy space where a personal transfiguration becomes a real possibility. To be transformed in God's likeness (*theosis*) is the highest goal of all hesychastic piety. "God has become human in order that humans become godly." It is through individual transformation that nations will be transformed.

The sixth point reflects the missionary theology of St. Sergius. The icon of the Holy Trinity invites meditation and contemplation in eucharistic terms. But it also enlightens the faithful for the sake of the divine mission. Jesus at the table invites us to accept the same calling he received from the Father. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you", says Jesus to John the Evangelist (Jn

13 Cf. further in Lossky (1997a).

20:21). The liturgical experience of the Trinity becomes a divine calling to human beings to become instruments of salvation to the world. This message of St. Sergius is also the message of Rublev and his masterpiece.

5. A SOURCE OF SPIRITUAL INSPIRATION FOR THE PRESENT

Historians have described Rublev's icon as an iconographical image of the Russian Orthodox character. In its form and content it generalises the best and the deepest sense of being an Orthodox believer. In this instance faith is embodied in an earthly image of a unified collective of people, deeply involved in conversation about the centre of what faith is all about — the eucharist. The divine collectivity is expressed by the Russian Orthodox term *sobornost*, a togetherness of a eucharistic community which was so prominent in the works of the Russian Orthodox theologian A.S. Chomyakov. Professor Dunayev of the Moscow Orthodox Academy, the highest theological institution of the Russian Orthodox Church, states “*Sobornost* is in essence a quality of the Holy Trinity and as such represents an ideal for the spiritual development of humanity” (Dunayev).

Rublev's icon was and is a foundational source of Russian iconography, in particular where it relates to the Trinity. The trinitarian theology of the Russian Orthodox Church finds here its master, as Raushenbach puts it (cf. Raushenbach). The icon of the “Holy Trinity” is much more than a theological expression or a liturgical point of departure in Orthodox worship. According to St. Sergius, the Trinity symbolises unity in all Christian life, regardless whether it is spiritual, social or political. No wonder Rublev's icon became one of the main images and symbols in Chomyakov's idea of *sobornost*. In this icon, “Holy Russia” finds its best expression. Here the Russian Orthodox nation rests in its eternal calling, preserving national unity by keeping to the true Orthodox faith. In the words of Ulyanov (2005), “Our national idea is in the icon of Andrey Rublev.”

Rublev's masterpiece has been marvelled at and copied many times. It has inspired poets and theologians, philosophers and musicians. The deep spirituality of the icon seems to offer a foundation for all those who seek God's presence. The great Orthodox theologian Pavel Florensky remarked, “There is the Trinity of Rublev and this means there is God” (cf. Dunayev). In post-Christian Europe, Rublev's message is as real as ever before, and not only for the Russian people and the Russian Orthodox Church. It is a universal message, inviting us to seek and contemplate unity in our mission of transformation. This is a unity which derives its strength from the kenotic heart of God, ready to sacrifice his only begotten Son in order to save and reconcile humanity (Jn 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:17-21). The apostle Paul once summarised this in his famous “Christ hymn”, when he said,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus; who although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped at, but emptied Himself, taking a form of a bond-servant. And being made in the likeness of men, and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by being obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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