

Seeing the Beauty of the Divine: A Murdochian Approach to Religious Art with Special Attention to Iconography

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The icon is a religious work of art in the Orthodox church, which paints the various scenes of the Christian Bible and the images of the saints. Although many icons were made and placed in the place of worship from the early period of church history, the use of icons has always been controversial among theologians and church leaders due to the Hebrew Bible's radical prohibition of making any image of God. During the European Reformation period in the 16th century, especially, magisterial Reformers destroyed religious images and statues, strongly adhering to their biblical principle. How to justify the use of icons, or to prohibit it, in one's personal devotion or public worship still causes unresolved tensions within Christianity.

The presentation is an attempt to defend the use of icons, avoiding complicated theological debates on the issue. By drawing insights from Iris Murdoch's notion of attention, it demonstrates that looking at the icons can have a unique effect of educating and healing distorted desires. This argument may initially sound weird and unrealistic because Murdoch was neither a Christian, nor showed serious interests in iconography. Nevertheless, her idea of metaphysics as a guide to art, religion, and morals can shed new lights on the way contemporary men and women appreciate the beauty of religious art, especially that of the icon, in a post-denominational and post-religious age.

For Murdoch, human beings are naturally ego-centric and thus unfree from the fantasies they created. Their self-centred ego can be healed by gazing at reality outside the self. In this sense, attention is a crucial moral skill for what she calls 'unselfing.' It can be efficiently practised by looking at good art pieces, which help to reorient the viewer's egocentric desires towards beauty outside the self.

In this light, the icon can be a remarkable object of loving attention. In a similar manner to Murdoch, the theology of icon stresses that the viewer is led to gaze at reality, which has been hidden or distorted by self-centred fantasies; it also offers a unique 'unselfing' view of the world in which all creatures are seen according to their value and dignity. Moreover, the icon's time-space structure dephenomenalises our habitual and conventional perception of the world. The theology of icon, therefore, situates the sanctification of the viewer's desire within a wider context of God's healing of broken humanity. Although Murdoch would not agree with the icons' strong theological implication, careful observation of the icon's unselfing effect may provide a complementary viewpoint both to icon theologians and to Murdochian scholars.