

There are many books by leading Orthodox theologians and scholars on all aspects of the Orthodox Church and this leaflet series provides some basic information in the hope that it might prompt further enquiry.

**LEAFLETS IN THIS INTRODUCTION TO
ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY SERIES:**

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All text in these leaflets is mine except where indicated, therefore any errors of fact or in grammar are mine. I should be grateful to have those errors pointed out so that corrections can be made.

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"The Orthodox Church.....has preserved unadulterated the first and most ancient ecclesiastical tradition and teaching, has avoided innovations and personal interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and dogmas of the faith, and is administered according to the ancient synodical system under local bishops in collaboration with the faithful and successive groups of both local and broader episcopal synods, of which the highest is the Ecumenical Synod, that of the Orthodox worldwide. The basic administrative canons, the details of which are regulated according to local needs, have been determined by the seven ecumenical synods. The Church is not managed by regional states in which it resides, although it collaborates in good works when asked to do so.

Within the entire Orthodox Church there is absolute cooperation in goodwill and mutual respect. Perchance minor human problems are addressed successfully through the application of the evangelical spirit."

*Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, from
"Encountering the Mystery."
ISBN 978-0-385-51813-0*

Orthodox Community of Archangel Michael
and Holy Piran, Cornwall.
www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk

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Exarchate of Western Europe and Ireland.
www.thyateira.org.uk

Ecumenical Patriarchate.
Οικουμενικόν Πατριαρχεῖον.
www.ec-patr.org



Agia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) Constantinople.

Fr.N.10/24

Introduction to Orthodox Christianity: ICON PAINTING "An article of interest!"



This article was written quite a few years ago, in response to a then current trend. Dr. John Yiannias originally gave this article as an addendum to a talk given at the Orthodox Theological Society in America.

See also "The Holy Icons" in this series of leaflets.



We've all perhaps heard the phrase "icon writing". Whoever invented this expression must have noticed that in the Greek word *eikonographia* and its Slavonic translation *ikonopisanie* the suffixes (*graphi* and *pisanie*) very often mean "writing." Our inventor thereupon thought it a good thing to speak of "icon writing," probably imagining that the sheer oddness of the phrase would attract more attention than the prosaic "icon painting" and also convey a greater sense of the sacredness of the act of producing an icon. Ever since, this tortured translation has stuck to the lips of many English-speaking Orthodox Christians who talk about icons.

However, the suffixes *graphi* and *pisanie* both mean depiction, as well as writing. The first—more to the point here than the Slavonic term, which was formed on the basis of the Greek—is related to the verb *gráphein/grápho* meaning any representation delineation — such as when you write the letters of an alphabet, but also when you sketch, say, a portrait. The precise translation depends on the circumstances. For example, "geography" does not mean "earth writing," but earth description, whether verbal or pictorial. "Scenography," from the word *skini*, meaning a shelter, by implication a tent, and by

further implication one of canvas, means the painting or other illustration of a backdrop, on canvas or similar material, for a theatrical production (whence our words "scene" and "scenic"); it does not mean "scene writing." Whether the delineation referred to is verbal or pictorial, *graphi* implies circumscription, as when the Church says that God the Father is *aperigraphos*. That does not mean, obviously, that God the Father is "unwritable." It means He is uncircumscribable, unbounded, undepictable, incomprehensible, unsusceptible to containment within the boundaries that we must impose on anything before we can comprehend or speak of it.

The habit of describing icons as "written" should not therefore be used. Not only does the expression do violence to English and sound just plain silly, but it can introduce notions without basis in the Greek texts — such as, that an icon is essentially a representation of words, as opposed to a representation of things that words represent.

The theologically important fact that icons, which are pictorial, and Scripture, which is verbal, are nearly equivalent can be conveyed in other ways than by torturing English. It's worth noting that in the Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the Greek word used for an icon painter is simply *zográphos* (in Slavonic, *zhivopisets*), meaning simply a depicter of life, or of forms taken from life: that the subjects depicted were religious was more or less assumed. It seems that when secular artists eventually gained higher social status than before, and *zográphos* could apply to them as well as to the makers of sacred representations, the term was superseded in Greek by the more specific *agiográphos*, or *eikonográphos* (in Slavonic, *ikonopisets*).

An icon is painted, pure and simple, or produced by some other technique, if made of enamel or ivory or whatever else. But it is not written, and never in the Church's history until our day, no matter what the language used, has the Church said or implied that an icon is written. Let's hope it isn't too late to expunge the expression. Dr. John Yiannias.

Question:
(Does photo-graphy mean "light writing"!?).
Greek etymology. Drawing with light.

