

Revelation as Concealment: The Theology of the Icon Screen

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*He remains hidden even after His manifestation,
or to speak more divinely, in His manifestation.*

Dionysius the Areopagite

Appearing in highly developed form during the later Palaiologan period, and commanding a position of outstanding visual prominence within the sacred space of the liturgy, the icon screen embodies a number of critical beliefs central to the Byzantine theological tradition. As a symbolic threshold that so conspicuously marked the boundary between the “sensible” and the “intelligible”, the icon screen effectively realized the uniquely Byzantine understanding of revelation as concealment, the paradoxical mode by which the uncreated manifests itself in and through creation.

Despite the dualism that is often imputed to the distinction between the “sensible” and the “intelligible”,³⁵ the Byzantines were not dualists, and developed a sophisticated theology of representation consistent with their belief that the invisible God had taken on flesh and was thereby revealed to the senses. For Byzantine religious thinkers, the appearance of the invisible God in the fabric of a human body complicated the binary

³⁵ This distinction, which Byzantine theologians associated with the icon screen, will be discussed in what follows. For now, it should be noted that later Greek thought posited a dynamic continuity between the sensible and the intelligible, locating both on either end of a single continuum, the one being an intensification of the other. Plotinus, *Ennead* 6.7.7, 30-31, for example, holds that “sensations here (i.e., in the sensible realm) are dim intellections; intellections there (i.e., in the noetic realm) are vivid sensations” (*LCL* 7:108); cf. Maximos the Confessor, *Mystagogy* 2: “The whole intelligible world is mystically imprinted in the whole sensible world in symbolic forms, for those who are capable of seeing this; and the whole sensible world subsists cognitively within the whole intelligible world by means of its inner principles. In the intelligible world it is in principles, in the sensible world it is in figures, and their activity and function is one, like ‘a wheel within a wheel’ [Ezek 1:16]” (*PG* 91:669C).

oppositions of ancient philosophy and promoted a new Christian synthesis of ontology, semiotics, phenomenology, and aesthetics.

Byzantine thinking about the nature of revelation had to contend with the appearance of the uncreated God in the concrete forms of the created world. That the Absolute could enter and be personally active in the relative conditions of time and space were beliefs derived, not from the schools of ancient philosophy, but from the religion of Israel and its sacred Scriptures. In reflecting on the accounts of God's various theophanies to his chosen people, patristic and Byzantine exegetes gave special attention to the heavenly tabernacle revealed to Moses during his sojourn on Mount Sinai (Ex 25:8-10). Following God's detailed directions, Moses constructed an earthly tabernacle corresponding to its heavenly archetype, which subsequently became the privileged locus of the deity, the visible home of the invisible God, who dwelt within its sanctuary hidden behind an elaborate cultic veil.

Because Byzantine interpreters of Scripture were also bishops of the Church, the tabernacle of Moses—and, by extension, the temple of Jerusalem—were taken as models for the construction, decoration, and symbolic interpretation of their own houses of worship. Thus the witness of Scripture to a liturgical veil, enclosing the divine presence and dividing sacred space, directly influenced the Byzantine icon screen, the main portal of which was equipped with a veil or curtain. This association was so strong that the symbolism of the veil could be extended even to the typically stone-carved entablature.³⁶

In addition, the gates of the sanctuary were (and continue to be) decorated with the iconography of the Annunciation, an image which directly evokes these themes, for at the very moment of her virginal conception, the Mother of God is depicted as spinning thread for the veil of the temple. With the inclusion of various icons along the entablature, the theological tableau was complete, for sacred images were the necessary corollaries of Orthodox faith in the Incarnation. Drawn like a curtain across the architectural frontier of the sensible and the intelligible, linked to the presence of God in the tabernacle of Moses, and closely associated with icons and especially the iconography of the Incarnation, the icon screen and its veiled portal were symbolic expressions of the

³⁶ Cf. Sophronios of Jerusalem, *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* 4: "The entablature is a type of the veil of the temple" (PG 87:3984D).

Christian belief that the invisible God had been revealed to the world through paradoxical concealment in a veil of flesh.

This chapter seeks to reconstruct a theology of the icon screen as it was understood around the time of its crystallization in the Late Byzantine period. The principal sources for such a reconstruction are the writings of St Symeon of Thessalonike (d. 1429), whose use of the symbolic theology of Dionysios the Areopagite (c. 500) is an important key to the task at hand.

Sacred Spaces: The Church and the Cosmos

Symeon's interpretation of the icon screen is situated within his larger understanding of the church building as an image of the cosmos. Far from being static or univocal, the forms and structures of this symbolic universe are fluid and complex, generating a multiplicity of simultaneous associations and correlations. Single, and seemingly simple, forms, such as a hemisphere or a column, are thus made to support several senses at once. In this respect, Symeon's mystagogical interpretations of church architecture are reminiscent of Patristic allegorical interpretations of Scripture, in which the consecutive elements of linear narratives are "spatialized" within a field of signs that refer backward and forward to each other, not within historical time, but in a manner similar to the interaction of elements on the surface of a painting or on a point without spatial extension. Symeon indicates, moreover, that architectural meaning is generated by the experience of the liturgy itself and emerges through an interactive process governed by various ritual determinants, including one's religious status, the nature of the ceremony or sacrament being conducted, the time of celebration (e.g., morning or evening), and the participant's physical location within the church building.

This polysemic and richly layered approach enables Symeon to map a large number of symbolic interpretations onto the basic longitudinal organization of sacred space. For example, he associates the three major divisions of the church building (narthex, nave, sanctuary) with the tripartite division of the cosmos ("earth, heaven, and the places beyond the heavens"). From another point of view, the same threefold division mimics (1) the "tripartite structure of the tabernacle of Moses and the Temple of Solomon", (2) the "three triads of the angelic orders", and (3) the "clergy, the faithful,

and those in repentance”. And because the three distinct spaces of narthex, nave, and sanctuary are contained within a single architectural unity, the church preeminently signifies the multiplicity within unity of the Holy Trinity.

This “Trinitarian” interpretive category, however, is of somewhat secondary importance within Symeon’s overall interpretation of liturgical space. Instead he more frequently employs a twofold formula, whose binary elegance and systematic efficiency deeply structure his architectural hermeneutics. From this perspective, the narthex and nave *together* correspond to the visible earth (understood to include the visible heaven), while the sanctuary is a type for that which exists beyond visibility, that is, the realm of the invisible God. The shift to a binary formula creates a grand division of sacred space that enhances the importance of the critical frontier demarcated by the icon screen. Moreover, the rationale for such a bifurcation is closely associated with central patterns of Christian belief. In a key passage, Symeon argues that the binary forms of sacred space are reflections of cognate patterns embedded within Christology, anthropology, and the doctrine of God, all of which are interconnected:

The church is double on account of its division into the space of the sanctuary and the space outside the sanctuary, and thus it images Christ Himself, who is likewise double, being at once God and man, both invisible and visible. And the church likewise images man, who is compounded of visible body and invisible soul. But the church supremely images the mystery of the Trinity, which is unapproachable in its essence but known through its providential activity and powers.³⁷

Within this passage, the two performance areas of the church (the sanctuary and the nave/narthex) are said to image the two natures of Christ, so that the visibility of the nave signifies the visible human nature of Christ, whose invisible nature is represented by the restriction of the sanctuary from public view. In the same way the twofold nature of man, composed of body and soul, is likewise imaged by the respective exteriority and interiority of the nave and the sanctuary. Finally the same bilateral structure is said to exemplify a central tenet of Byzantine theology, namely, the Palamite doctrine that the Godhead is unknowable in its essence (and as such unrepresentable) but nevertheless well known through its various manifestations and activities. In Symeon’s cogent use of these

³⁷ *P.G.*, 704A.

categories, the doctrine of revelation and the symbolic architecture of the church are formally unified based on a distinction between what is given to visibility and what is not, or cannot, be given to vision or knowledge.

The Sanctuary Veil as Sacramental Symbol

Symeon appears to have effectively overcome the binary opposition of the sensible and the intelligible, which for him are united without confusion in the Incarnation, embodied in liturgy and the sacraments, and monumentalized in the twofold organization of sacred space. However, into this seemingly indissoluble union, the Palaiologan symbolist introduces an important qualification. Turning to the language of “veils” and “symbols,” Symeon maintains that the earthly liturgy differs from its heavenly counterpart in one critical sense:

The Lord’s priestly activity and communion and comprehension constitute one single work, which is celebrated at the same time both above and below, except that there (i.e., in heaven) it is celebrated without veils and symbols; but here, on the contrary, it is celebrated through symbols, because we are enveloped in this heavy load of fallen flesh.

Here the “single work” of the liturgy is differentiated with respect to the place and manner of its celebration. Whereas the heavenly liturgy is celebrated in “unveiled” immediacy, its earthly performance is mediated through “symbols”, which Symeon characterizes as “veils”. With this latter image, what covers and conceals has become a metaphor for the totality of material objects employed in the celebration of the liturgy (e.g., church building, altar, chalice, vestments, incense, bread, wine, etc.). Contrary to expectation, however, these symbolic veils are not said to obscure the “communion and comprehension” of divine mysteries, but are the very things that make such communion possible; they constitute the irreducible medium of religious experience, a network of figures, as it were, providing the conditions for grasping what is beyond figuration. There is thus one liturgy, in which heaven and earth jointly participate, although it is experienced in a manner proper to each. In the case of the earthly liturgy, celebrated by human souls “enveloped in flesh”, participation in the divine can occur “only through symbols and veils”, a phrase that designates the mode of apprehension of realities that

otherwise cannot be known. Symeon can therefore be said to espouse a realist notion of the symbol, a sacramental theology of “real presence”, in which symbolic forms do not refer indirectly to objects outside of themselves, but rather contain or participate directly in their referents.

That Symeon chose to encapsulate a general theory of the symbolic in the image of a liturgical veil was not of course arbitrary, and is closely related to his understanding of the boundary demarcated by the icon screen. In distinguishing those within the sanctuary from those who stand outside it, Symeon describes the latter as “participating in the mysteries of the sanctuary, not immediately, but mediately, and through certain veils”. The sanctuary doors, moreover, which are closely associated with these veils, have the same symbolic function, and are described in virtually identical terms:

Afterwards, the doors are closed ... because the sublime things cannot be contemplated by the lower members, neither are the mysteries understood by all, for at that moment Jesus is veiled from the many, and disclosed only gradually. Afterwards, the doors are opened, analogous to the contemplation of the more advanced and perfect ... and Christ unites and is united to all, but in a manner analogous to the capacity of each, for all do not immediately participate in him, for some do so purely and without veils.

At first glance, we might be inclined to recoil from what appears to be the construction of a theological caste system, whose higher levels enjoy immediate and unveiled access to God, whereas the lower members can only gape at veils drawn across closed doors, passively awaiting incremental disclosures controlled by a hierarchy. Upon closer inspection, however, Symeon’s remarks are concerned only to differentiate specific forms or modes of contemplation, and thus should not be taken to mean that the “lower members” do not participate in the divine source of redemption. All participate in God in ways that are proper to them. No one is by nature excluded from communion with God, but the transcendent deity is imparted only under various symbolic forms, or “veils”, which are analogous to one’s capacity to receive it.

Symeon and the Tabernacle of Moses

Symeon's cosmological interpretation of sacred architecture, including his identification of the icon screen with the heavenly firmament (Gen 1: 6), are part of his larger belief in the relationship between the tabernacle/temple and the church building, both of which are understood as microcosms of creation. In demonstration of this claim, Symeon gestures toward the organization of liturgical space, contending that the "tripartite structure of the church building was foreshadowed in both the tabernacle of Moses and the temple of Solomon, for these were divided into three parts", culminating in the Holy of Holies. He maintains, moreover, that these spatial divisions correspond to the structures of the spiritual universe, and he concludes that, just like the Holy of Holies, "the Christian sanctuary is a type of the place 'beyond the heavens' [cf. Heb 9:24], containing the 'throne' of the immaterial God [cf. Heb 1:8; 4:16; 8:1; 12:2]". The ritual use of incense, which Symeon describes in detail, is yet another mark of continuity between the tabernacle and the church, for in both settings it symbolizes the effusions of glory emanating from the divine presence.

Symeon also sees in the tabernacle a type of the body of Christ, a connection authorized by the New Testament, and richly developed by the early Church Fathers. In addition to the tabernacle itself, Symeon is especially interested in its central veil, a covering he identifies with the flesh that concealed the incarnate Logos. This connection is particularly pronounced in his comments on the main portal of the sanctuary, which is arguably the visual and symbolic focal point of the entire icon screen. Symeon sees the sanctuary portal, presumably veiled, as a symbol of Christ, the self-described "door of the sheep [John 10:7], because Christ is the one who gave us 'entrance into the Holy of Holies through the veil of his flesh' [cf. Heb 10:19-20]".

Extending this basic principle further, Symeon provides a similar interpretation for the veil that covers the altar table: "The veil on the altar symbolizes the immaterial tabernacle around God, which is the glory and grace of God, by which he himself is concealed, 'clothing himself with light as with a garment' [Ps 103:2]". This passage finds a close parallel in a work by Theophanes of Nicaea, for whom the divine "garment of light" is a designation for the uncreated energies of God. For both writers, God is said to be hidden, not by invisibility or darkness, but paradoxically by light itself, that is, by the

very medium that makes vision possible. Contrary to expectation, it is light that simultaneously reveals and conceals the presence of God, like a garment at once giving shape to and covering the body. In respect of the tabernacle, it is significant that, in the Hesychast tradition exemplified by St. Gregory Palamas, the idea of “concealment in a sacred veil” was identified with the ascent of Moses on Sinai, where he “entered into the cloud” (Ex 24:18), beheld the “pattern of the heavenly tabernacle” (Ex 25:9), and was instructed to “make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet woven, and fine linen spun” (Ex 26:31), a central biblical narrative to which we may now turn.

The Veil of the Tabernacle

Patristic and Byzantine theologians dealt extensively with the veil of the tabernacle (and, by extension, that of the temple), which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies (cf. Ex 26:31; 37:3, 40:3; Mt 27:51). As a representative example, we may cite a twelfth-century homily on the early life of the Virgin, by Iakovos Kokkinobaphos. The homily, based on the *Protoevangelium of James*, deals in part with the Virgin’s work on the veil of the temple, a textile which the homilist interprets as a symbol of Christ’s flesh. In Mary’s purple thread, the Byzantine monk sees foreshadowings of the Incarnation, for Christ will presently “clothe himself in the royal robe of the flesh woven from the body of the Virgin, and in return he shall reveal her to be the Queen of all created beings”. He then ponders the meaning of the word “veil”, which he defines as a “polysemic term” having “a range of applications”. He observes that the curtain of the temple is a “veil”, for it shrouds in mystery the presence of God. And the sky above us is also a “veil”, for the heavenly azure conceals the expanse of the universe. The homilist therefore concludes that the veil of the temple was intended by Moses to symbolize the veil of heaven, and both veils together prefigured the flesh of Christ, which enfolded and concealed his divinity.³⁸

³⁸ See also Chrysostom, *Commentary on Hebrews* 15.2: “By the ‘tent not made with hands’ he means the flesh. And he called it a ‘greater and more perfect tent’ since God the Word and all the energy of the Spirit dwell within it, for ‘it is not by measure that God gives the Spirit to him’ [John 3:34]. And it is ‘not made with hands’, for man did not construct it, but it is spiritual, ‘of the Holy Spirit’ [cf. Lk 1:29]. He calls the body a ‘tent’, a ‘veil’, and ‘heaven’ to the extent that one thing or another is signified, although they are called by the same word. I mean, for instance, that heaven is a ‘veil’, and the flesh of Christ is also a ‘veil’, for it concealed his divinity” (PG 63:119, 139); cf. Theodoret, *Commentary on Hebrews* (PG 82:741, 749).

Christian thinkers who made these associations were exploring a relationship between the veil of the tabernacle and the flesh of Christ that was established in the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 10:19-20), and thus had the authority of sacred Scripture. In the Letter's spiritual interpretation of the tabernacle liturgy, the "outer tent" is said to be a "symbol of the present age" (Heb 9:9), rendering by implication the "inner tent" a symbol of heaven and the age to come. Traversing the outer boundary, Christ the "high priest" passed through the "greater and more perfect tent not made with hands" (Heb 9:11), entering, "not into a sanctuary made with hands, an antitype of the true one, but into heaven itself" (Heb 9:24). "Therefore," the argument concludes, "we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the veil, that is, his flesh [Heb 10:19-20]."

In order to clarify these ideas, it is helpful to recall that the tabernacle was understood to be a representation of the six days of creation (Gen 1-2) progressively revealed to Moses during his six-day sojourn on the summit of Mt. Sinai (Ex 14:16).³⁹ The days of creation, moreover, determined the various stages of the tabernacle's construction, and thus the veil of the sanctuary was installed on the second day of construction (Ex 26:31-33) in imitation of the "firmament" that God placed between the heavens on the second day of creation (Gen 1:6-8). The basic liturgical division of the tabernacle, therefore, corresponds to the basic structural division of creation, the veils of which respectively conceal the visible mysteries of the universe and the invisible mystery of God.⁴⁰ For later commentators, including Philo, Josephus, and the author of the Letter

³⁹ See, for example, Basil of Seleukia, *On the Ascension of Christ*: "God directed that Moses the writer should become the iconographer of creation, and through the construction of the tabernacle he was ordered to imitate the creator, for the appearance of the tabernacle is an imitation of the earth and of the things on the earth" (PG 18:1097C); and Kosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography* 5.19-20, who states that the tabernacle was a "type" (cf. Ex 15:30) of what Moses had seen on Sinai, i.e., an "impress of the whole world" (SC 159/2:35-39).

⁴⁰ Compare Chrysostom, *On the Nativity of Christ*: "The temple was built as an image of the entire world, sensible and intelligible. For just as 'heaven and earth' are divided by the 'firmament' which stands in their midst, he directed that the temple be likewise divided in two, and he placed a veil in its midst; and whereas that which was outside the veil was visible to all, that which was within it was not given to vision, except to the high priest" (PG 49:355); Theodoret, *Questions on Exodus* 60: "The tabernacle was an image of creation, for just as God divided the earth from the heaven by means of the firmament ... he ordered that the veil be placed in the midst of the tabernacle as a type of the firmament, dividing the tabernacle in two" (PG 80:281AB); Basil of Seleukia, *On the Ascension of Christ*: "He screened off the inner portions of the tabernacle, gracing its invisible portion by means of a curtain. Through these forms he legislated the imitation of heaven and earth, desiring to bar entrance to the innermost shrine, which he reserved only for the high priest, as a type of the Lord's ascension into heaven" (PG 28:1097CD); and Severianos of Gabala,

to the Hebrews, the veil represented the boundary between the visible world and the invisible, between becoming and being, between the world of the senses and that of the intellect. Those who passed through the veil were mediators, figures who functioned in both worlds, and who through ritual sacrifices united humanity with divinity.

In the context of the tabernacle liturgy, the high priest alone was permitted to pass through the veil, and only on the Day of Atonement. On that day, he wore special vestments fashioned exactly after the manner of the veil, and they too represented the fabric of creation (cf. Wis 18:24: “For upon his long robe the whole world was depicted”). According to Philo, the high priest was a figure of the heavenly high priest, that is, the Divine *Logos*, who likewise passed through a veil, not in the process of ascending into the sanctuary, but in descending from the divine throne to earth (Wis 18:14-16). As the *Logos* descended through the veil of the heavens, it took form and became visible, clothing itself in the elements of creation: “Now the garments that the supreme *Logos* puts on as a raiment is the world, for he arrays himself in earth and air and water and fire and all that comes forth from these.”⁴¹ Arrayed in the perceptible garments of creation, the *Logos* revealed itself to the senses and now “stands on the border” as a mediator between creatures and their creator.⁴² The veiling of the *Logos*, which revealed its presence precisely by concealing it, proved to be an important expression for the idea of incarnation, and passed directly into Christian usage through Hebrews 10:19-20.

With these ideas in mind, we may return to the iconography of the Annunciation and the significance of its location on the threshold of the sanctuary. The Virgin’s work on the veil of the temple is an activity coincident with the Incarnation, and it is the act of

On the Veil of the Temple: “The temple was one structure, but nonetheless divided into two parts, i.e., the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, being a type of the Lord’s body. For just as the former was visible to all, but the latter only to the high priest, so too was the Savior’s divinity hidden in the Incarnation, while operating in plain view. And the veil, too, was a type of the Lord’s body, for just as the veil stood in the middle of the temple, separating that which was outwardly visible from the inner mystery, so too the body of the Lord veiled his divinity, barring mortal vision from the sight of the immortal. And this teaching is not mine, but Paul’s, who says that he “opened up a new way through the veil, that is, his flesh” (Heb 10:20)” (PG 52:830B).

⁴¹ Philo, *On Flight and Finding* 110 (LCL 5:68).

⁴² Philo, *Who is the Heir of Divine Things?* 205-206: “To His Word, His chief messenger, highest in age and honor, the Father of all has given the special prerogative, to stand on the border and separate the creature from the creator, saying ‘I stood between the Lord and you’ [Deut 5:5], that is, neither uncreated as God, nor created as you, but midway between the two extremes, a surety to both sides” (LCL 4:384).

“drawing out the thread” that signals the very moment of conception. In producing thread for the veil of the temple, the labor of Mary’s hands symbolizes the activity of her womb. Concealed (and thus revealed) in a curtain of colored matter, the formless divinity is transformed in the womb of the Virgin, who has rendered it dissemblant from its very self, engendering a form for the formless through the folds of a garment, a veil of flesh. The Christian association of the sanctuary veil with the tissue of the human body finds a striking parallel in Philo’s *Life of Moses*. Commenting on the fabrication of the various temple curtains, Philo notes that the “ten curtains” are woven from “four kinds of material”, which multiply into the number “forty”. Philo observes that this figure is “generative of life, corresponding co the number of weeks in which man is fully formed in the workshop of nature”, a metaphor of fecundity later ascribed to the womb of Mary.⁴³

Symeon himself associates the Mother of God directly with the central gate of the icon screen, which had been decorated with the iconography of the Annunciation from at least the Middle Byzantine period. The incarnational symbolism of the sanctuary doors could be further enhanced by the addition of an actual curtain or veil suspended across the entrance into the sanctuary. Altogether, the conjunction of Scripture, theology, iconography, and architecture created an appropriate symbol for the incarnation of the *Logos*, who passed through the virginal gates and entered the world of matter. Weaving a cultic veil for the temple, the figure of the Virgin was poised, not simply on the visible entrance to the sanctuary, but on the threshold of that which is beyond visibility, the presence of the invisible God. In such a richly articulated arrangement, the promise held forth by Mary’s thread appeared to be fulfilled in the folds of an actual fabric, the veiled gate of the Christian temple.

As the central narrative in the history of God’s revelation to Israel, the book of Exodus had a profound influence on the patristic and Byzantine theological tradition. References and allusions to Moses’ sojourn on Mount Sinai resonate across the entire landscape of Greek Christian literature, from the New Testament to the writings of Symeon of Thessaloniki and beyond. The veil of the tabernacle assumed a particularly prominent place within Byzantine theology and served as a central metaphor for the

⁴³ Philo, *Life of Moses* 2.17 (LCL 6:490).

paradoxical nature of divine revelation. In addition, the symbolic perception of the tabernacle as a type of the cosmos—as a material instantiation of immaterial realities—and of its veil as a kind of heavenly curtain, encouraged expansive cosmological interpretations of the church building and the veiled portal of its sanctuary. The influence of the Letter to the Hebrews insured that the Incarnation would never be absent from reflection on cosmology and sacred architecture, which continued to be shaped by theological controversies down through the last years of the empire.

Revelation as Concealment

Like his patristic and Byzantine predecessors, Symeon did not regard the purposeful tension between the sensible and the intelligible, the visible and the invisible, the revealed and concealed as constituting an ontological or metaphysical dualism, but rather as a complex *perichoresis* of the spiritual and the material, a fecund *syzygia* internally bounded by charged liminal sites.

As noted already, this basic structural principle is deeply indebted to the work of Dionysios the Areopagite, with respect to whom Symeon identifies himself as the “last and least of the students of his students”, a self-effacing claim for the place of his own work in an unbroken chain of interpretation and practice. In particular, Symeon’s repeated assertion that the earthly liturgy must be mediated by “veils and symbols” is taken directly from Dionysios’s treatise *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, in which the self-styled disciple of Saint Paul (cf. Acts 17:34) declares, “It is impossible for the divine ray to otherwise illumine us except by being concealed in a variety of sacred veils,” a notion that succinctly expresses Dionysios’s doctrine of revelation and is variously attested throughout the Areopagitical writings.

In a celebrated passage from *On the Divine Names*, Dionysios describes creation as the self-manifestation of the uncreated Deity: “In a moment of ecstasy, the Cause of all comes to be outside Itself by Its providence for all beings; and being, as it were, seduced by goodness and affection and love, It is led from being above all and transcending all and is brought down to being in all” (4.13). This movement of “erotic ecstasy” is God’s creative gift of himself to the world, in which the absolutely nameless and unknowable

becomes knowable through all things and subject to all names. But even in this ecstatic self-impartation, God nevertheless remains unknowable in his essence. In his own nature, God is neither a being nor even being itself, but in the ecstasy of creation he becomes “all things in all things and nothing in any” (7.3). And because creation is the self-revelation of God himself, Dionysios regards all creatures as “symbols” of intelligible reality—“veils” of the uncreated divine energies, as the Hesychasts would say. Creation, then, is a form of incarnation, because it is a true theophany of the divine, the paradoxical visibility of the invisible, the sensuous apprehension of what cannot otherwise be grasped.

These Dionysian principles were developed by Gregory Palamas and his disciples, who unequivocally affirmed that human beings know God by sense perception no less than by intellection. Thus the distinction between “mediated” and “unmediated” communion turns out to be a false dichotomy. Direct ontological communion with God is not distinct from some other form of communion, but rather takes place in, through, and because of the various symbolic mediations. Such a paradox means that, in the very moment of its unveiling, the divine conceals itself. The self-revelation of God, precisely because it is the revelation of an inexpressible plenitude, is necessarily a veiled unveiling. This is no less true for the Incarnation: for God remains “hidden *even after* his manifestation, or to speak more divinely, precisely *in* his manifestation”.⁴⁴ In the paradoxical “manifestation of the unmanifest”, what is “incomprehensible is given in what is comprehensible, for it is in every case the incomprehensible God in his totality who makes himself comprehensible in his communication”.⁴⁵ Thus one cannot, in a gnostic ascent from sense perception to “pure” intellection, strip away the symbols, or remove the veils, because when these are removed, there is “nothing” there—nothing, that is, which can be given to human comprehension. In the context of creation, what is required is a movement *into* the signs, an understanding of the veils of creation as ontological symbols. One does not encounter God by discarding created symbols, but by experiencing them *as* symbols, as visible mirrors of the invisible. God is present to us

⁴⁴ Dionysios, *Letter 3*, which in its entirety reads as follows: “He who is beyond being has come forth from his secret place, becoming a human being in order to manifest himself among us. And yet he is hidden even after his manifestation, or to speak more divinely, precisely in his manifestation. For this mystery of Jesus is hidden and cannot be explained or understood as it is in itself in any way, but even when spoken remains ineffable, when thought unknown.”

⁴⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Denys”, in his *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (Edinburgh, 1969), 185.

only in and through created symbols, accessible only in the veils that conceal him, because the nature of the symbolic is simultaneously to conceal and reveal, or, “to speak more divinely”, to reveal by concealing.

Toward a Theology of the Icon Screen

Though often disparaged as a form of private mysticism, Byzantine Hesychasm was deeply rooted in the experience of the liturgy. Participation in the grace of the sacraments (understood as participation in the uncreated energies of God) was in fact the basis for the theology of St. Gregory Palamas, and not something additional or extrinsic to it. The same holds true for the theology of Dionysios the Areopagite, which disallows any “spirituality” divorced from the sacramental life of the Church, forging instead a *via media* between the extremes of an anti-institutional mysticism, on the one hand, and an anti-charismatic institutionalism on the other. Hence the ease with which the *corpus Dionysiacum* was taken up and championed by the liturgically-minded Hesychasts, not least among them Symeon of Thessaloniki, who was the leading liturgiologist of the Byzantine Church in its late period. We may therefore characterize Symeon’s entire project as an attempt to correlate a Dionysian discourse of liturgy (including its rites and material culture) with the theology of his revered predecessor, St. Gregory Palamas. For Symeon, the language of “light” and “illumination” that pervades the liturgy and the sacraments is identified with the timeless, uncreated light of the Transfiguration. The living archetype and source of every sacrament, moreover, is the dual-natured person of the incarnate Christ, through whom and in whom the divine energies are given to the world, mediated through a “veil of flesh” (Heb 10:20).

As we have seen, the status of creation within this tradition is complex. In the ecstasy of its providential love, the transcendent deity has come to exist “outside of itself”, reflected within the “variety of sacred veils” that constitute the differentiated forms of the cosmos. Symeon affirms that the result of this “manifestation of the unmanifest” is neither a binary opposition between God and creation nor a disjunction of the “sensible” and the “intelligible”. Rather, the logic of revelation is conceptualized through a twofold reduction: to the imparticipable, unknowable God on the one side, and to the symbolic forms or determinations of creatures on the other. The visible world is thus

the manifestation of the hidden beauty of God, the perfect figuration of what cannot be figured.

Symeon applies this twofold principle, not simply to the elements of creation, but to the material culture of the liturgy. The church is not simply a building or conglomeration of objects, nor is it an institution or department of state, but a literal extension of the Incarnation, a manifestation of the deity “outside of itself”, a living icon of the divine energies as structures of divinizing grace symbolically figured on the plane of material being. Consistent with this belief, the twofold distinction of sacred space, organized around the visibility of the nave and invisibility of the sanctuary, is nothing less than a figure of the Godhead, unknowable in its essence (and therefore unrepresentable), but well known in and through its various manifestations and activities.

At the same time, the Byzantine mystagogue envisions the same sacred space as an “icon” of both man (body and soul) and Christ (humanity and divinity), based, once again, on a distinction between what is given to visibility and what is not, or cannot, be given to vision or knowledge. Here it is worth noting that, in the microcosmic temple of the human person, it is precisely the soul—with its capacity to create images and mental representations of material objects—that serves as the boundary (and link) between raw sensation and the higher noetic activity proper to the intellect.⁴⁶ Such an intermediary, image-creating role suggests an intriguing analogy to the location and function of the icon screen, and it is to be regretted that Symeon does not explore this in any detail. Instead, his efforts are more directly focused on the church as a symbol of the body of Christ.

Consistent with these overarching symbolic functions, the icon screen is an imposing, even formidable, object. Its power lies precisely in its liminality, in its

⁴⁶ Compare Aristotle, *On the Soul* 3 (417 D-428A); Proclus, *The Elements of Theology* 195: “The Soul is all things, so that it is sensible things after the manner of an exemplar, and intelligible things after the manner of an image. This is because soul stands midway between indivisible and divisible realities, the latter in relation to the body, and from this middle place produces sensible images, but with respect to intelligible things simply discloses its own causes—thus it is itself the ‘cause’ of the sensible paradigms, but is itself caused by, and thus the image of, the noetic”; Palamas, *Topics of Natural and Theological Science* 17: “In creatures endowed with intelligence, this imaginative faculty of the soul is an intermediary between the intellect and the senses”; Dionysios, *Letter* 9.1: “The impassible part of the soul borders upon the simple and most deeply interiorized visions of deiform images.... This is evident in those who, having beheld the things of God beyond the veils, subsequently shape within themselves a certain image.”

compelling dual structuring of the mind and its reflection, referring each observer in turn to an integral vision of God and the world. As a “symbol”, the screen is always between two things, two universes, two temporalities, two modes of signification: between sensible form and intelligible ideal, between forms and formlessness, vacillating endlessly between a present dissemblance and a future semblance. As the symbol of the cosmic boundary between the “sensible and the intelligible”, the icon screen is “saturated with the meanings of the invisible world”, and yet it is “visibly manifest and vividly material”. As a symbolic veil of the flesh, it is “pure meaning wrapped in the thinnest membrane of materiality; the common limit of the sequence of earthly states and the sequence of heavenly states, the boundary where the final determinations of earth meet the increasing densification of heaven. It is thus the sign of a movement, a reflexivity, between the two realms, in which both domains of existence are given to consciousness and vision”.⁴⁷

As the “thinnest membrane of materiality”, the icon screen corresponds to the enigma of the virginal body depicted on its central portal: a threshold both radically sealed and yet radically open to the informing presence of the divine. Locating the Virgin and her angelic interlocutor around a cultic gate allowed Byzantine iconographers to play with the distance and the spacing that their colloquy presupposes, with the idea of movement across a threshold, an originary rite of passage through which the *Logos* clothed himself in human flesh—a confluence of two ecstasies: the descending ecstasy of God to man, and the ascending ecstasy of man to God.⁴⁸

A matrix of figurability *par excellence*, the icon screen is thus a symbol of symbols, a super-icon or meta-icon, the icon of all icons, for it expands to include the entire world of “all things visible and invisible”. It is a boundary, a sign of difference that both divides and unites, bifurcating the perceived world and reintegrating it through a series of reflective, interconnected correspondences, a range of relations mediated by gestures, language, and imagery. It puts into play, displays for all to see, a fecund

⁴⁷ The quotations are from Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, trans. D. Sheehan and O. Andrejev (Crestwood, N.Y., 1996), 43; cf. Staniloae, “Revelation through Acts, Words, and Images”.

⁴⁸ Cf. Maximos the Confessor, *Ambigua* 10.9: “For they say that God and man are paradigms of each other, so that as much as man, enabled by love, has divinized himself for God, to that same extent God is humanized for man by his love for mankind; and as much as man has manifested God who is invisible by nature through the virtues, to that same extent man is rapt by God in mind to the unknowable” (*PG* 91:1113C).

universe of figures from where, and in which, the Spirit will progressively come forth. Every sign, every symbol, every meaning acquires depth by dividing, by splitting in two: the “letter kills but the spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). The icon screen is the mysterious book, written on both sides, to be fully unsealed only at the end of time (cf. Rev. 5:1).⁴⁹

Before concluding this chapter, let us consider a final line of questioning. Our choice of descriptive language can be unwittingly prescriptive. Is the icon screen necessarily a “screen” or a “barrier” in any meaningful sense of those terms? Is it not made to disappear from view? Do we see it as a wall that arrests and turns back our vision or as a permeable membrane that both conceals and reveals? Is it the suppression of vision or its intensification? Is it a barrier or an enticement—a foothold for ascent and a strategy of grace? According to Florensky, the icon screen is itself a *vision* inasmuch as it is the manifestation of Christ and his saints, an appearance of heavenly witnesses, who proclaim to us that which comes from the other side of mortal flesh. If the church were filled with mystics and visionaries, there would be no need for such a screen, but because our “sight is weak and our prayers feeble”, the screen provides us with visual strength for our “spiritual brokenness”. Florensky stresses that this spiritual support does not conceal from the believer an otherwise lucid object of sight; on the contrary it points out to “the half-blind the mysteries of the altar, and opens for them an entrance into a world closed by their own entrapment”. Destroy the material icon screen, he asserts, and the altar itself would “wholly vanish from our consciousness as if covered over by an essentially impenetrable wall”. A temple without an icon screen constructs a solid wall between the altar and the faithful, whereas the screen itself “opens windows in that wall, through whose glass we see what is permanently occurring beyond”. To destroy it thus means to block up the windows. It means “smearing the glass and diminishing the spiritual light for those of us who cannot otherwise see it”.⁵⁰

We expect, and perhaps demand, that every revelation be an unveiling, a drawing aside of the curtain, a lifting of the veil. But when the object of revelation is not an object at all, but something invisible and beyond predication, it can give itself to us only through an appearance that is also a concealing. Divine transcendence, divine hiddenness, remains

⁴⁹ According to Gregory the Theologian, revelation has a double aspect, and thus is given “on stone plaques engraved on both sides, because the Law has a manifest and a hidden aspect” (SC 250:104).

⁵⁰ Florensky, *Iconostasis*, 62-63.

absolute, and yet providentially reveals itself by concealing itself in a sacred veil, which is at once the revelation of, and means of participation in, the very life of God.