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The Iconic Vision of an Orthodox Church

Road to Emmaus interviews Orthodox Church designer Andrew Gould of Charleston, South Carolina on his work and vision as a contemporary Orthodox church designer. With his unique background in ecclesiastical art history and architecture, Andrew presents a compelling and inspiring overview of the elements of Orthodox church-building and how they impact our worship.

RTE: Andrew, your article, “On Earth as it is in Heaven,” which precedes this interview, is quite remarkable. I don’t think we usually hear architects and designers speaking with such depth about traditional and historical architecture.

ANDREW: I do have a rather unusual skill set in that my education is in both art history and architecture, which is not common at all. Surprisingly enough, it’s rare for architects nowadays to have very much knowledge of historical architecture because modern architecture schools do not teach traditional design. It is even more uncommon for an architect to have any background in the theoretical side of art history, that is to say, how art is analyzed and understood by art historians, and how that changes through time and reflects cultural and academic biases. When I studied art history, I had a particular interest in older ideas regarding medieval art as an expression of the Christian world view.

Opposite: Church of our Savior on the Nereditza, Great Novgorod, Russia. Photo: A. Gould.

RTE: In “On Earth as it is in Heaven,” you say that one thing that traditional Orthodox churches have in common are their massive walls and high, sometimes even opaque windows. This is startling, and something that most of us may not have noticed before. You also speak of the experience of a Byzantine church interior as “mass transfigured by light,” and, “this is the same light as in the holy icons, holy and all pervading....” Can you go further with this?

ANDREW: It’s a striking quality of Orthodox churches from all times and all places that they have a fortress-like solidity to them. The walls are exceptionally thick. The medieval churches whether they are Byzantine or Russian, often have walls of two or three meters thick, maybe more. This would have been all the more striking considering that in the time those churches were built, almost all buildings were made out of wood and were of a somewhat temporary nature. People who were living in flimsy and rather primitive wooden buildings would have entered the church and suddenly been in a building that was built as strongly as city walls or a castle.

An extraordinary amount of resources and effort went into building churches with this kind of solidity, so they must have considered it extremely important to do so. In most cases it was not actually for defensive fortification that they did this, but for a sense of spiritual fortification, that a church should convey the quality of being a bastion of the kingdom of Heaven that stands apart from the chaos of the world. There is an intuitive quality experienced in a building like this, a building whose walls are so thick that they block all of the sounds and vibrations of city life happening outside of them, and hold the coolness and silence of the night. You can feel the temperature of that thermal mass radiating off the walls and they have this sense of extreme stillness and permanence, like nothing ever changes within those four walls. Right here we begin to see that these churches have an iconic quality, that they are showing us something of the eternal, everlasting, unchanging quality of the kingdom of Heaven.

The Iconic Vision of an Orthodox Church

RTE: Along with the liturgy and icons, of course, the unchangeableness of any Orthodox church is what gives us that intimation of being close to heaven. Theologically, the church building should be of no less account than our own bodies.

ANDREW: Absolutely. That is the single purpose of an Orthodox church—to be an icon of the kingdom of heaven. There is really no reason to add to that or state it in a more complex way. The interior of an Orthodox church is simply an icon, and all of the characteristics and qualities of Orthodox church architecture are there to support that iconicity. So, it is appropriate to start with this sense of eternal stillness and invincible strength that the very walls of the building convey, because that is, of course, the first thing we think of when we think of heaven. It is permanent, everlasting, and unassailable by demonic forces.

Of course, another side of this story is that Orthodox churches are introverted. When you are in an Orthodox church you are not supposed to have any awareness of space outside of the church because the space inside of the church, in an iconic sense, is limitless. When you look at the icons of the church, up into the dome at the Pantocrator and further down at the frescoes and iconostasis, you can see the entirety of the kingdom of God. You can see the saints from all ages, and the only thing you can see beyond those saints is the gold background of the icons, which is the opaque and unknowable divine essence, beyond which, of course, we cannot see. So, it is a unique conflation of a small and limited introverted space iconographically representing essentially everything. The entire cosmos is visible within that small space. So you should not have an awareness of what is going on outside.

In a sense there is something theatrical about that. There are no windows in a theatre because you are not supposed to allow your mind to be aware of anything that is happening outside of you. That singularity of vision is the same thing we experience in the church. We are supposed to focus on this awareness of being present with the saints and angels in heaven. Now, a theatrical production is a fantasy that you have to force yourself to believe in; in an Orthodox church it is a spiritual reality that by our faith we do believe in, but by the weakness of our senses we do not normally perceive. In the Orthodox Church, all of its iconography and all of its liturgical music are there to allow our earthly senses to observe that which they are normally too weak in our fallen state to see, though this heavenly realm is present at all times. And so the architecture of the church should give us a portrayal of heaven wherein we aren't distracted by any of the ugly or meaningless things that exist in everyday life.

The quality of massive walls is one side of that and the quality of light is the other. The light in an Orthodox church is a very special medium. For one thing, it has to come through windows that allow light in without giving us

very much awareness of where that light is coming from. And so the windows tend to be small and high up, and in the Orthodox tradition are never decorated in a way that makes us highly aware of the light as it passes through the window (i.e. stained glass windows in western architecture). With stained glass, the light is beautified in a certain way, but the way in which it is beautified makes us very aware that this light is coming from outside the building, and what the weather is like out there.

In an Orthodox church, which has an iconic vision, we must believe that this light is radiating from within the church, because in the iconic system all of that light is within the kingdom of heaven, as St. John describes in his Revelation. When describing the New Jerusalem he specifically says there shall be no night there, no light of the sun, and they need no candle because God dwells there and the light from God illumines everything.

He describes everything in the New Jerusalem as being made of gold, clear as crystal, which is an impossible statement because, of course, gold is opaque, but he is trying to convey this idea that everything in heaven is pervaded with light, so that it simultaneously seems reflective and transparent, almost like phosphorescence, as if everything is shining with the same light and reflecting the same light. The suggestion that gold is as clear as crystal is really a beautiful way of saying something that is quite familiar to us from Dionysian theology: that the divine light radiates from God into us and we shine with that same light ourselves; in a sense refracting it out of our own transfigured bodies. Therefore the saints shine with the same light as God.

The iconographers depict this very clearly when they paint an icon that has a gold background and a gold halo. The only difference between the gold background and the gold halo is just a thin red line differentiating them, but they have identical light because the light shining from the saint is the same as the light shining from God. In this vein everything in an Orthodox church should shine. Everything in the church should seem as reflective as gold, as clear as glass, and as radiant as the sun, so that the whole interior might seem to be a vision of transfigured matter.

There are historically two specific ways in which this may happen with Orthodox church windows. In early times, going all the way back to the dawn of Byzantine architecture in the sixth century, it was common for windows to be made of alabaster. At that time the windows were quite large and they covered a substantial amount of the surface area of the church walls. We can still see windows of this kind in the Ravenna churches. And, of course,

when light shines through alabaster it shines in a brilliant fiery golden light. It does not seem delicate and transparent like a stained glass window, but gives the impression of being thick and solid like a masonry wall. And so these early churches with their alabaster windows suggest that the architecture itself is glowing as if the walls have a sort of internal phosphorescence. These churches have no shadows; light is everywhere. Everything is pervaded with a uniform golden glow, and this very effectively gives this quality of standing inside an icon.

The practice of using alabaster windows gradually died out, probably simply due to technological changes when alabaster became less available in the Middle Ages and was replaced by the new technology of making transparent glass. So in medieval Orthodox churches we typically see a different technique, that of using small windows with perfectly clear glass, but putting them up high and in very thick openings, so that it's more or less impossible to see out of the windows from floor level. Rather, you have these brilliant sunbeams that come through the clear glass. The sunbeams come down into the church hitting the frescoes, the icons, the glittering brass lamps. They reflect off these shiny surfaces and thereby reflect all through the building, again giving this quality that the building is glowing from within.

It's particularly beautiful when standing in an Orthodox church and suddenly a shaft of sunlight hits a gilded icon or a shiny brass lamp or a polished marble surface and fills the church with this brilliant radiance of light reflecting off a precious surface. When this happens you don't perceive this as sunlight coming from outside the building, but rather, you see the brilliant internal glow of some icon or lamp inside the church shining with light and filling the whole space with light. And over the course of a service the very air in the church takes on this reflective quality as it fills up with smoke from incense. As the service goes on, the sunbeams become brighter and brighter because the smoky air makes the sunbeams visible, and by the end of the service there is a haze in the church that is pervaded with shafts of light.

This illuminated haze gives the most extraordinary suggestion of the very air inside the church glowing with light. This is perhaps the quality that the Russian iconographers have long attempted to paint by using such a transparent and nuanced palette as in the work of Andrei Rublev, where you don't see distinct crisp colors, you see colors that all seem to be pervaded with a luminescence. There is almost an indistinct quality to these Russian icons compared to more classical Byzantine icons, but I think what these icons are trying to por-

tray is that it is not just the background and the halo or even the figures that glow, but it is the very atmosphere surrounding the figures that is pervaded with light and so we see this somewhat subdued and washed-out palette.

This is exactly what we see in church towards the end of the service when we cannot see anything clearly because the church has filled with incense and the sunbeams render the air nearly opaque. You can't even see through the sunbeams. A quality that I think few have ever really commented on, but which is really quite apparent, particularly in attending a monastic service that is long and uses a lot of incense, is that by the end of the service the icons, the architecture, the lamps, the vestments, have all become visually obscured by the smoke and the sunbeams, to such an extent that the atmospheric quality of the church is by far the most visually prominent phenomenon. You can see the sunbeams much more prominently than you can see anything else in the church. And what an amazing quality—that the church has actually transfigured before our eyes as we stand there and behold the service. We had entered the church in the wee hours of the morning when the sun had not yet risen, everything was dark, only candles lit the space and we saw only hints of flickering gold light reflecting off the iconostasis - only a hint of this divine spark which begins the service. Over the course of the morning, as the sun rises and the sunbeams enter and the air fills with smoke, we gradually see a brilliant opacity of divine light all around us, and so we have witnessed the transfiguration.

“That God Dwells There Among Men”

RTE: As you were speaking of this marvelous transfigured impression, I thought of the passage in the *Primary Russian Chronicle* about St. Vladimir sending out emissaries to discover the true religion, which was revealed to them in the beauty of the service in Hagia Sophia.

ANDREW: It's good that you bring that up because the specific comment that was made by those emissaries speaks to this very topic. They said, “We know this: that God dwells there among men.” Of course, there is tremendous beauty in Catholic architecture and Islamic architecture, but in those buildings there is not the impression that God dwells in the temple among men. The height of the western church's architectural beauty, the Gothic

Opposite: Choros (chandelier) of Holy Ascension Church, Charleston, SC, designed and built by New World Byzantine Studios). Photo: A. Gould.



cathedral, conveys the idea that God is outside and above the temple. The architecture points up to heaven and the stained glass transfigures the external sunlight as it passes through the windows, so that we look up and look out to worship God Who is in heaven outside the space of the church. Gothic architecture, with its naturalistic architectural forms, eschews plaster and paint, but rather shows off the natural qualities of stone and beautifies the cold grey stone into these extraordinary geometric shapes of trees, plants, and animals. It is trying to lift up the things of earth as a monument to God; to regularize the chaotic fallen world and to lift creation up to heaven in the hope that this will be a sort of offering to God Who is above, and that He will have mercy on us down below. Of course, St. Vladimir lived somewhat before the schism and before Gothic architecture, but the differences between the Eastern and Western liturgical vision and ideas of iconicity were already quite apparent in his time.

Likewise in Islam they build mosques that have the quality of jewel boxes. They are ornamented with a tremendous richness and regal splendor, but are completely devoid of anything iconographic, anything representational. They seem like abstract spaces, as does the Muslim worship within these spaces—the bowing down toward a *mihrab*, which is, in and of itself, nothing, but only an abstract architectural gesture that indicates the direction of Mecca. And of course, the Islamic faith emphasizes that man is very low and that God is very high, and that, really, the two do not meet; they surely do not meet in the sense that they meet in Christianity. So regardless of how beautiful a mosque may be, mosque architecture has never sought to convey an impression that God is within the mosque. It only conveys the impression that man has attempted to dignify himself by beautifying the mosque to an extent that man might be found worthy to kneel before God (because, of course, one only kneels in a mosque). So, if it is true that the emissaries of St. Vladimir attended services in an Orthodox Church, a Catholic Church, and in a mosque, I think it's very appropriate that they would have observed that only in the Orthodox Church does it seem that God dwells with men. The very specific and deliberate attempt of Orthodox liturgical art is to convey that impression, and this is, of course, the fundamental gospel of Christianity.

RTE: How does all of this work in Hagia Sophia as we see it today?

ANDREW: Hagia Sophia has changed over time. When it was originally built the windows were much larger and filled with alabaster. Over time the ala-

baster disappeared and, as they've been ever worried about the building collapsing, they have strengthened it by making the windows smaller and the walls more solid. But still to this day it very much has that quality of an interior glow. Part of this is because the walls are almost completely clad in polished marbles, which have a transfiguring quality as the sunbeams hit them, and the ceilings are entirely covered with gold mosaic which magnifies that quality. It also has to do with the form of the interior space, which has an embracing womb-like quality. Everything in these architectural forms are rounded—arches, arcades on columns, and shallow domes that curve back in on themselves—so that even when you walk out into the side aisles and ambulatories they bring you back into the space. All of these shapes add to the sense of introversion and embrace.

We might even connect this to the ancient proto-symbol of the egg of Genesis, the ancient idea that an egg contains the entire cosmos within it symbolically. We have this sense inside of Hagia Sophia because its egg-like shape makes us feel that it contains everything. There is a cosmic symbolism to it that is pre-Christian, going back to the connections to pagan wisdom that the Roman architects still understood in the sixth century. The Pantheon in Rome, which was built four hundred years earlier, has this same quality. In its geometrical perfection and its singularity of light entering through the oculus and reflecting off the polished marble walls, it seems like an icon of the entire cosmos. When you are in there it is impossible to think of anything outside of it.

RTE: To add to that architectural beauty, in the early seventh century the Pantheon was converted into a church dedicated to St. Mary and the Martyrs. Twenty-eight cartloads of holy relics of martyrs were removed from the catacombs and placed in a porphyry basin beneath the high altar to prevent their desecration by barbarian tribes who were pillaging the outskirts of Rome. The Roman Catholic liturgy is still celebrated there on Sundays and feast days.

ANDREW: And how appropriate given the name of the building.

Traditional Hierarchy as Freedom

RTE: In describing the vertical axis of the Church, with the Pantocrator at the top of the dome and the angels, evangelists and saints below, you say, “To the medieval mind, hierarchy meant freedom; it was the mark of identity and security.” This is a remarkable statement. Can you take us further?

ANDREW: The medieval mind sought to organize the world, both things seen and unseen, into categories and hierarchies. In the pre-scientific era when relatively little was known about the organization of the solar system, the relationship of things above and below the earth was mysterious and rather frightening. And there were superstitious assumptions about the natural order of things, such as the popular idea that hell was literally underground, making the world seem very unstable and uncertain.

Likewise, there was political uncertainty that was even more dangerous than it is now. In a feudal society, even the smallest disagreement could result in wars and disruption with no end in sight. People wanted to have pseudo-scientific organizational systems to figure out where every living thing, and angels and demons, fit into a cosmic hierarchy so that their place would be known. Likewise people had a tremendous respect for absolute monarchy because the stronger the political hierarchy, the safer they were. People had an intuitive desire for an emperor all the way through the classical and medieval eras. Even people who lived in a distant feudal hinterland of Europe took great comfort in knowing that there was a Charlemagne or a Byzantine emperor somewhere a thousand miles away who theoretically had the authority to keep the peace even if they would never see such peace with their own eyes.

In Christianity the Church itself, of course, is hierarchical. The Church keeps administrative order by having bishops, priests and deacons, and theological order, for example, by elevating certain saints to the title of “theologian” (“doctor” in the West), giving the stamp of authority to their teachings. The hierarchy that we see expressed in the iconography painted within the church; that is to say the Pantocrator at the top, then the angels and prophets, and on down to Biblical saints and more recent saints—and likewise the axial hierarchy of the altar to the east and narthex to the west—would have a comforting effect on the medieval mind. On entering the church they would feel, “Everything is in its place, everything is subject to God’s authority.”

This would be a beauty and a comfort to them given the scientific and political uncertainties of the world they lived in.

RTE: Many people today would not think of hierarchy as freedom.

ANDREW: It's a kind of restriction in an obvious sense, but it is also a kind of freedom in that a distinct structure of beliefs allows people to operate within those beliefs without expending too much effort at having to work things out on their own. I think this is apparent when we look at how deep and profound an understanding of the world we gain through reading the writings of the saints and the theology of the Church. It gives us a framework of philosophical belief and world view that is, in a sense, liberating, because it allows us to move past the basics and concentrate on whatever nuance of that world view is of special concern to us, in other words what we'd like to specialize in.

In contrast, when looking at the writings of the atheistic philosophers of the Enlightenment, it's quite astonishing how much effort they waste in rehashing the most basic concepts; yet they never manage to move beyond these basic concepts. Really, it moves one to pity that such brilliant minds were wasted on such basic philosophical dead ends when, if they had had a hierarchical framework of Christian belief, they could have been expending that effort on much more sophisticated and beautiful ideas.

Spiritual Transparency of the Iconostasis and the Holy Altar

RTE: Presently, some clergy and laity see the iconostasis as a barrier and would like to have visual access to the altar. In their view everything should be free, open and accessible, as they claim it was in the early Church. You, in turn, speak of the iconostasis as being visually opaque and spiritually transparent. If we rush to embrace this newer view, I wonder if we aren't settling for physical transparency and spiritual opaqueness? As the old saying goes, "familiarity breeds contempt," or at least a lack of mystery.

ANDREW: Yes, in my opinion this matter of iconostasis design is exceptionally important in the system of liturgical art. It is probably even more important than the architecture. This may seem an odd statement given that, historically, the iconostasis as we've received it has only existed for about a thousand years. There were other types of screen which were much simpler in the first millennium. That might lead one to believe that an iconostasis is not essen-



tial in Orthodoxy. But I think that it is important to consider why the iconostasis has been the focus of so much attention, development, and improvement over the course of our history. The simple answer is that, according to the way Orthodox services are now ordered, almost everyone in the church now spends almost the entire time simply staring east at the iconostasis. As a practical matter of visual impact, nothing in the church is anywhere near as important as the iconostasis. Thus a church building which is plain and uninteresting, but which has a great iconostasis, can give an extremely successful liturgical experience, whereas a fine building with a mediocre iconostasis may give a disappointing liturgical experience simply because the iconostasis is what we are looking at most of the time. So, I think the iconostasis needs to be an area of extremely careful focus in modern churches.

The question of whether an iconostasis should be transparent or opaque is almost the same as asking whether the altar should be holy or not, because holiness, sanctity, simply means being set apart. Because we are Christians and not pagans, we do not believe that holy things have intrinsic holiness due to magical qualities, that is to say, we don't make an idol out of the altar and believe that God actually lives in there, the way primitive pagans might. We know that the altar is simply a table like any other, and therefore the only thing that makes it holy is that we set it apart for holy use. In an architectural sense the way we set it apart is by putting it behind a wall. The wall doesn't only set the altar outside of our space, but also outside of ordinary life by dignifying it with a gilded and divine beauty. The iconostasis looks like the very gate of heaven. The altar appears holy to us in proportion to the intensity of these architectural gestures.

The practice of making the altar holy by making it invisible goes back, of course, to the very beginning of Christian liturgy. Even in the earliest house churches there was a barrier and, very early on, a *templon* screen was built over that barrier. The purpose of the *templon* screen was to hold a curtain to hide the altar. The argument that I have frequently heard, that we should go back to the early Byzantine *templon* screen because it was more open and accessible, is dishonest because the altar never was open and accessible. As I said, the *templon* screen's purpose essentially was as a curtain rod and it was always there to hold a curtain. Likewise, with the western ciborium (*baldachino*), whereby the altar is surrounded by four columns with a canopy on

Opposite: Cathedral of the Kazan Mother of God, Moscow, Russia. Photo: A. Gould.

top, the purpose of that structure also was to support a curtain and the entire ciborium was enclosed in a curtain during the consecration.

So, all of these liturgical structures originally had a very simple purpose, which was to hide the altar. But I think it occurred to people over time that there can be more to a visual statement of sanctity than merely obscuring something with a curtain. So over time icons were placed on top of the templon screen, and before long icons were placed between the columns of the templon screen, and what was originally just a curtain rod became a screen of icons. Thus a new symbolism appears, which is that we are not just saying that the iconostasis is the gate of heaven, we are actually showing that it is the gate of heaven, by showing that there stands before us a sort of phalanx of angels and saints in almost military formation who stand around the altar. And this is a very beautiful idea because we cannot possibly see God himself, God the Father at the altar. God the Father is invisible, but in seeing Christ and his mother and the angels gathered around the altar, and by seeing the gilded backgrounds of the icons, this is as spiritually close to seeing the throne of God in high heaven as we can possibly come. We see the angels and saints around the throne; we see the gold light reflecting off the iconostasis. What more could we ever ask to see?

Over time the iconostasis became more and more ornamented and taller, and this gives a third way of expressing the sanctity of the altar. Quite simply, the more ornamentation, the more richness that we put around any given subject, the more we dignify it with the appearance of being regal and divine. This is exactly the same reason that the throne of a king is gilded and ornamented and placed on a dais with a brilliant tapestry hung behind, and a tasseled canopy suspended above. This ensemble of splendor was there to give a visual impression that the king is regal and has divine authority. It's the same with the iconostasis.

The iconostasis is covered with ornament to show that beyond this is the throne of God. It should be mentioned that rich ornamentation is actually a bit atypical of Orthodox liturgical art. Historically, Orthodox churches, unlike western churches, were not decorated very much. They tended to be rather plain architecturally and then painted with frescoes of saints, but before the 17th century, Orthodox churches really did not really have much in the way of ornamentation on the architecture or the furnishings. Through the influence of Renaissance and Baroque art, elaborate ornament entered Orthodox architecture in the 16th and 17th centuries.

In certain ways this is regrettable because often this ornamentation is a distraction from the icons. Although on many of the better 17th-century icon screens there is really a very successful marriage of Baroque ornamentation with iconography. We see these marvelous screens both in Greece and Russia that have gilded icons and gilded wood carving, and the coloration and shapes of the carving are so sensitively done that the icons and the ornamentation seem to blend together into a single unified structure. It gives the most magnificent impression of divine splendor; as if the iconostasis is on fire with divine energy writhing through this gilded ornament.

We tend to be apprehensive about innovation in Orthodox liturgical art, but this is one innovation that was a marvelous success. The carved and gilded many-tiered iconostasis should really be recognized as one of the great achievements of world art. I think that any art historian or architectural critic would acknowledge that a Russian cathedral iconostasis is one of the most extraordinary sights that one can find on earth. And it is really among the crowning cultural and artistic achievements that Orthodoxy has ever wrought.

This modern war on iconostases, where people pass judgment on these screens as some kind of pastoral or pedagogical hindrance to observing what is going on up at the altar, is a tragedy and an embarrassment. We should really step back and consider this exchange we are making. We are saying that the act of observing the priest and the altar boys shuffling around behind the iconostasis and moving the vessels on and off the table and doing what little physical role they have there—that the mere act of observing this, and the marginal amount of pedagogical or pastoral value that may have—is more important than the vision of divine splendor in the fully-developed iconostasis, which gives us a glimpse of the very energy and divine fire that surrounds the throne of God. It's a great shame upon modern people that they would look upon that as some kind of fair trade.

RTE: In visiting the Greek site of ancient Olympia, interspersed among the classical ruins are later ruins of churches built over the site after the empire became Christian. One of them retains a low marble iconostasis, decorated simply with crosses (any curtain, of course, has long since disappeared) and it is easy to assume that this was all there was. Certainly there was always a curtain in the Hebrew temple in Jerusalem, and it is logical that the Jewish Christians would have continued that tradition.

ANDREW: Exactly. I believe the curtain was there from the beginning because it represented the veil of the temple. The myth of the informal early Church has always struck me as being a Protestant invention. The Protestants, of course, believed that the Catholic Church had lost its way in becoming so liturgical and that the “Book of Acts Church” had done things much more simply. But, of course, those reformers of the sixteenth century had no archeological knowledge of what the church was like. This was a fantasy, and yet somehow to this day, and even among Orthodox, this myth of an open and democratic, non-liturgical early church has somehow pervaded our consciousness to the extent that we can’t seem to shake it. No matter how much we read the early church documents that describe how the liturgical ethos of the early church was actually very much the way it still is, and very much the way it was in synagogue and temple worship among the Jews, we still hold on to this Reformation myth.

Ancient Ways and Orthodox Architecture

RTE: In *The Discarded Image*, C.S. Lewis says in reference to the medieval world, that once we lost touch with nature, we could no longer be Christian. On the other hand, real artists can seem almost like pagans because they have such a strong yet detached fidelity to nature and its symbols. Is this also true for church architects and designers? Can only an architect with an appreciation for the ancient ways design an authentic Orthodox church?

ANDREW: Yes, I think that is right. The language of liturgical art was not invented by Christianity and most of what we have in the Orthodox tradition to a large extent comes from ancient Judaism or Roman paganism, or from oriental influences. For instance, a substantial amount of the architectural ornamental styling that distinguishes Byzantine architecture from Roman architecture comes from Persian influence. So to have an historical understanding of where the forms of Orthodox architecture come from and what they symbolically mean, requires having a rather good understanding of ancient pagan architecture and of the ceremonial origins of things like processions, liturgical fans, incense, and lamps. All of these things have a liturgical past that goes way back into ancient Judaism and Pharaonic Egypt, and we need to remember that the kinds of things we use in church were also used thousands of years earlier in ceremonies that honored the ancient kings and gods of many different peoples.

The meaning, forms, and use of these things evolved for millennia before they were taken up for Christian purposes, and some of the qualities that make liturgical art effective at portraying the presence of divinity in our ceremonies are universal—that is to say, they are not specifically Christian. Some of these liturgics were developed by pagans or Jews who recognized that these practices had ceremonial or artistic efficacy in conveying the presence of God. It is important to remember this, because when modern people attempt to analyze the origins and the purpose of certain implements and ceremonies that exist in Orthodox services, we are quick to pass judgment on them as sort of foolish archaic trappings of purposes that don't exist anymore, things that intelligent modern man would probably be better off without.

An example of this would be liturgical fans. I've heard it said by many clergymen that these were adopted in ancient times by Christians because they had problems with flies landing on the Holy Eucharist, and that they needed fans to blow away the flies. Therefore, by extension, they suggest that now that we have enclosed air-conditioned buildings and we bathe and we don't have so many flies in church, it's quite ridiculous that we still use these things. This is a modernistic analytical approach, and it is completely false. Looking at the tomb paintings from ancient Egypt we can see that liturgical fans have been in use for at least 7000 years, probably far longer, and that their function has always been primarily a ceremonial function of bestowing honor upon a king. They exist in many cultures for this purpose, and the sight of altar servers holding fans at either side of the altar or of the Gospel book gives an obvious impression of servants lending honor to these holy things.

Fans are a universal ancient archetypical act which has been baptized into Christianity, and the same is true of almost everything in our architecture and in our liturgical art. Speaking specifically of architecture, the kind of shapes that exist in Byzantine architecture—the domes, the arches, the marble columns—all of these things come from Roman architecture and some of the things that the Romans had came from Greek architecture, while several of those come from Egyptian architecture, and so on back into pre-history. These things persist not because they had specific symbolic meaning to any given culture or religion, but because they were found to be generally effective at portraying dignity, grandeur, or divinity in the context in which they were used.

So, we've inherited a technological system of architectural forms and styling that has been refined through the experience of many different peoples

and religions over millennia. Orthodox architecture, which reached its high point of beauty in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, was the result of many thousands of years of experimentation and improvement. And it's simply impossible to understand or defend each of these things analytically.

We have to remember that fundamentally Byzantine architecture is really Roman architecture, the architecture of the Roman civic basilicas, whose purpose was a meeting place for the emperor to hold audience in front of the people. These forms have been adopted for the analogous Christian purpose of being a meeting place for God and the faithful, but it's doubtful that Christians on their own could ever have invented a system of architecture and liturgical art as splendid as what we have.

When I go to art museums I spend a lot of time looking at Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Persian, and Islamic art, most of which is liturgical art, and looking at these implements from other millennia, other religions, and thinking, "Why did they make these things in this way? Why do they look that way? What kind of lighting conditions were these designed for? What kind of deity were they made to honor?" As a liturgical artist I find these questions very interesting because often it is best to understand our own tradition by contrasting it to other traditions that have different religious purposes.

When we look at the liturgical art of other religions we see that there are some instances where liturgical things are analogous to those used in Christian ceremony, and we see other places where the liturgical art looks quite different because it has a different purpose. Sometimes seeing this contrast gives us a better appreciation and understanding for Christian liturgical art and what it is trying to achieve. So, what I would emphasize is that we have to respect the received tradition because it is a tradition, rather than pick it apart and analyze it on grounds that the modern mind can understand. But at the same time we should not blindly assume that everything that is part of Christian tradition is only Christian. Much of it is pre-Christian tradition that has been baptized into Orthodoxy, and in understanding this we will have a better understanding of the practices and forms of Eastern Orthodoxy.

RTE: And since each one of us has been made in the image of God, it is a comfort to think of it as a universal human form that we've baptized, such as the widespread use of bread and wine for liturgical meals.

Opposite: Andrew Gould. Photo courtesy Philip Davydov.



Roman Authority and Universality Expressing the Beauty of the Heavenly Kingdom

RTE: To go on, in the West we've learned to think of Rome as a colossus of military might and law and order, yet in your article you say, "Rome showed us the beauty of divine authority, and to forget this beauty is to lose sight of the heavenly kingdom." This is fascinating. Can you elaborate?

ANDREW: It is often remarked that it is no accident that Christ came during the height of the Roman Empire. Historians tell us that it was the inter-connectedness, the means of travel and communication and the cultural homogeneity that existed in the Roman Empire, that facilitated the fast spread of Christianity throughout the world. But I think there is an artistic side to this providential history also. The Roman Empire invented the idea of universality. The project that the Romans embarked upon was not merely to conquer and rule the world, but actually to Romanize the world. That was something new. To my knowledge there was no other empire that had had the idea that foreign people, people of foreign ethnicity and foreign tongues, could actually be culturally converted, and then become equals.

In ancient times identity was so bound up with local religion, ethnicity, and language that it would have been inconceivable to most ancient people that foreigners would ever worship their gods or speak their language. The Romans, however, felt that they had something to offer which really could be a universal world culture, and it's remarkable the extent to which they succeeded. One can look at Roman ruins all the way from England to Iraq and see buildings that look almost identical. Ordinary people lived in courtyard houses with marble colonnades, mosaic floors, and fountains with a universal Mediterranean styling that was accepted from one end of the empire to the other, and most adopted a common language.

And so the Romans created the idea that people of any nation could convert to worshipping the same gods, following the same cultural practices and using the same ceremonial language of state, and the Christianization of the Roman Empire followed the precedent that Rome herself had already set. And because Roman architecture had this universal appeal, it was an architecture that had room for the beauty that Rome had assimilated from every corner of the world. We see in Roman art the refined sculpture that came from ancient Greece, the most precious stones and ivory from Africa, and the most beautiful metal work imported from barbarian lands like the Scyth-

ians and the Celts. We see in the architecture a quality of hierarchical cosmic geometry that came from Persia.

The Romans brought together the most beautiful things and the most precious materials that they discovered in every culture that they assimilated, and they added all of these things into the universal Roman way of life, thereby achieving an architecture that Christians could adopt as an expression of a religion that was meant to be for everyone. Because Roman architecture did not appear to come from any specific nation, everyone seeing these Roman buildings could feel they were their own. Because it had brought into itself the ornamental beauty from every corner of the world it was an architecture that was well suited to glorify the universal God as opposed to a local deity.

RTE: And Byzantium was the crowning glory of all of this?

ANDREW: Yes. Byzantium took it even further because the eastern empire united the majesty of Rome with the nuance of Greek thought and the vocabulary of the Greek language. It also brought with it oriental influences from the Sassanid Empire in Persia that I mentioned earlier. For instance, in studying Roman architecture, it's quite a shock to look at the columns in Hagia Sophia and observe that these Christian builders abandoned the millennial-old tradition of classical order. These columns do not follow the Doric, Ionic or Corinthian orders that the Romans inherited from ancient Greece, but rather have exotic looking capitols covered with what's called "wind-blown acanthus" ornament, from Sassanid Persia—which looks unlike anything that had ever been seen in Roman architecture. So, the eastern empire embarked on this wonderful artistic project to unite the grand technology of Roman arch and dome building with beautiful exotic ornament from the east. As they did so, the builders of Hagia Sophia also brought in the finest precious stones and marbles from all over the Roman Empire to create something that was truly universal. It's a monument to the very best that the entire world could bring together.

The Primacy of Beauty

RTE: In your article you also emphasize beauty as a primary principle of architecture: "It was not for theology or propriety that the Byzantines so adorned their temples. It was for beauty. In beauty lies truth, and by it we

show our love for God.” You bring our readers up short with this, because recent interviews in *Road to Emmaus* have emphasized that beauty indeed comes first, then truth and goodness.

ANDREW: Yes, this is another area in which we see a disconnect between how ancient people understood art and how modern people understand it. Modern people would take ideas like truth and theology first and then figure out how to express these principles in art. But art was never made with that intention. It was made to be the most beautiful art and the most effective for its practical purpose that the artists were able to do. But when we look back upon their art, we are so quick to pass judgment on its symbolic meaning, and say that we know for certain why the building has a certain shape, or why the figure in the icon is wearing certain colored clothing. We presume that we know what the artist was thinking and that the artist deliberately put these interpretations into the work.

Artists probably did not operate as rationally as that. In general they worked within the tradition they inherited and tried to make the art as beautiful as it could be. Such art naturally expresses the worldview of the artists. In the case of Christian liturgical art there is a great deal of meaningful symbolism because it is inevitable that good art expresses the worldview of the one who made it, but it is also apparent from reading historical documents by and about artists from the Middle Ages that they were simply working for the purpose of beauty. In quotations that survive from Byzantine times, where people of the era describe why a certain church is a great church, they speak purely in terms of beauty and they speak of beauty as a kind of intoxication—that the beauty overwhelms the senses and makes one forget one’s surroundings. There is never a description of any liturgical art in rational, analytical or symbolic terms.

We also observe this phenomenon in looking at the gradual evolution of iconography. If we look at the early icons from Sinai, we see that they are quite portrait-like. They look very much like the Fayum mummy portraits and like the frescos from Pompeii. Only gradually over time did the early Byzantine icons become flatter and more hieratic, and the drapery more stylized and angular. And only over many centuries does a meaningful and deliberate iconographic canon of colors, drapery, compositions, inscriptions, and so forth gradually evolve. There was never any individual artist along the way who simply thought through these things analytically and decided,

“We’re going to make this saint wear this color robe because it symbolizes such and such.”

Instead, over time as they looked at one another’s work it became clear that certain painting techniques were more effective than others for the liturgical purpose of the icon. And so gradually the conventions of painting each saint were refined until they achieved an unsurpassable perfection. Once that was recognized it became the canon and little change occurred after that. It’s really very much like natural selection in biology—certain things were more successful than others and so they became prevalent and then they were canonized.

RTE: It’s satisfying to think that when the depiction of a saint reached perfection, then it was recognized as the canon and done that way ever after. Do modern iconographers still think that way?

ANDREW: Modern iconographers have a challenge because they have a much better knowledge of the extent of the canon than historical iconographers ever could have had. We have printed books, the internet, and ease of travel, and it’s quite possible for the modern iconographer to look at every historic instance of a certain icon and know all the ways it has ever been painted. So the modern iconographer is up against the greatest iconographers who have ever lived as his precedent. This is really a terrible burden as an artist. It would be much easier to paint the Trinity if you’ve only ever seen rather primitive early examples of the Trinity icon. After gazing upon Rublev’s Trinity, you can’t possibly imagine that there is anything you could do to paint a better one. This excess knowledge we have nowadays is a troubling thing and can easily lead one into despair and abandonment of the idea of the canon, and of course, into modern experimentation.

RTE: What would you offer as an antidote for an artist facing this?

ANDREW: The answer to what do we do when it’s impossible for us to surpass Rublev, or Hagia Sophia, in the case of an architect, is that we must remember that every artist has to work with the circumstances that are available to him. It is not so difficult with architecture, because no architect today can build another Hagia Sophia. We don’t have the same materials, programmatic needs, or that kind of a budget. The practical limitations on any modern church-building project are going to steer us in a very different direction than Hagia Sophia. Our task is to do the best we can within the limitations



we have. Likewise, an iconographer is not called to make copies of Andrei Rublev's paintings. A modern iconographer is called to do the best with what he has, meaning the best materials he can get, the budget he is offered, and most importantly his skill level. If the skill of Andrei Rublev is not available, then we figure out how to paint as well as we can with the skill level that we have, and this may result in something that looks very different from what Andrei Rublev did. What he could do with his skills may be entirely different than what we can do with ours.

From Classical Architecture to Christian Style

RTE: In a seminary class on the ethics of beauty we read architect Christopher Alexander's "The Timeless Way of Building," and halfway through, I felt as if I was being reborn. Was Alexander an influence on you as well? What other writers or designers have inspired you along the way?

ANDREW: I think that Christopher Alexander and I must intuitively think in exactly the same way. To be honest, although I've leafed through it, I've never really read his book, which is essentially a series of observations of sensible architectural gestures that tend to occur in most traditional contexts. The way that I approach architecture is exactly the same way that he describes. I travel, I look at the best cities, at the best buildings in the world. I absorb the traditional elements and ways of using materials and space into myself so that I am essentially able to look at any architectural idea, whether it is my own or someone else's, and have an intuitive reaction that, "Yes, this conforms with what we see in traditional building," or "No, something is being used irregularly here, there is something wrong with this idea." I don't really think about it as a series of specific rules or patterns as Christopher Alexander organizes them in his book, but I think of the entirety of art and architecture throughout history as a sort of canon of tradition. Having absorbed this into myself I am able to see whether any new idea is conformant with tradition or not.

The specific designers of the modern age who have inspired me would certainly be the artists and architects of the revival of Medieval Art that occurred in the late Victorian period. This began with the Gothic Revival in England and France which became a culturally significant movement in the

Opposite: "Wind-blown acanthus" columns, Hagia Sophia. Photo: A. Gould.

mid-19th century and continued through the 1920s as the predominant style in which new churches were built.

The architect who really set the standard for quality in this movement was A.W.N. Pugin. He designed the magnificent Gothic detailing on the Houses of Parliament in London in the 1840s. A convert to Catholicism, he was the major force behind Neo-Gothic architecture becoming the culturally prevalent style in Victorian England. There had been Gothic revival buildings in England from the mid-18th century, but he was the first to take it seriously as a matter of culture and religion. The Gothic buildings before him had been for the most part romantic follies, but he wrote a series of books that contended that medieval architecture was a matter of cultural morality and set Gothic architecture up as a truly Christian style, in contrast to classical architecture which he called pagan and tyrannical. His ideas about Gothic architecture were very much the reason that the Victorian British Empire adopted it as the favored style of the state as well as of the Church.

Pugin was also the first architect to do Gothic architecture really well; the first to design new buildings which had the mystical and liturgical beauty of medieval work. After him came the Arts and Crafts Movement, which was essentially founded by William Morris and his close friend the painter Edward Burne-Jones in the 1860s. The Arts and Crafts Movement likewise grew through the Victorian period, until by the late 19th century it had become the predominant style for both domestic and ecclesiastical furnishings in England, and to a large extent in America also. These men really were geniuses. They were exceedingly sensitive to medieval beauty and although not all of them were religious, they had an intuitive understanding of the sacred and liturgical quality of medieval art. Because of their influence the entire world is full of magnificent medievalist buildings; not only churches, but town halls, train stations, parliament buildings and so forth, in every place the influence of the British Empire reached. These are surely some of the finest buildings created in modern times.

The artists of these movements have been my particular inspiration because they demonstrate that it is entirely possible for modern artists and architects, who are sundered from medieval tradition, to make this tradition live again. When I was in college I studied for one year at University College London because I wanted to do a particular concentration of study in the Gothic Revival and the Arts and Crafts Movement in England. I read the work of these theorists and learned what it was they were looking at histori-

cally, what they had to do to make these styles practical and meaningful in modern times, and what they said about medieval architecture to convince people that this really was the right style for the modern age. In many ways, I have emulated what they did in my own career.

Interestingly, although it was English Gothic architecture and art that was their primary focus, many of those artists and theorists had some contact with Byzantine architecture and with the Orthodox Church. It was, in part, through their Victorian-era writings about Byzantine architecture that I first learned a special appreciation of the profound meaning behind Orthodox architecture. There was one writer in particular named William Lethaby, who, although he designed few buildings, was very well known as an architectural theorist. He wrote a book called *Architecture, Mysticism, and Myth*, which set out to examine all of the ancient monuments throughout history and discover certain universal protosymbols that can be found in buildings from every culture and from every period. It was a sort of guidebook to the interpretation of cosmic and liturgical symbolism in architecture. He wrote this book in 1891 and it became extremely popular among English architects.

Because William Lethaby had specifically called out Byzantine architecture as the architecture which most fully embodies these meaningful universal symbols, and most fully unites these symbols to Christian doctrine, his book fueled a brief revival of Byzantine architecture in Victorian England. His book was a major reason why Byzantine architecture was chosen for the construction of Westminster Cathedral, the great Roman Catholic Cathedral of London begun in 1895. And so this Victorian author, William Lethaby, was ironically one of the writers who opened my eyes to Byzantine architecture. It is his methodology of symbolic analysis of ancient buildings that I used in my essay, “On Earth as it is in Heaven”.

RTE: You also find 19th and 20th-century northern Europeans, usually Catholic or Anglican, who are able to do the same in writing saints’ lives. They capture the ethos of the saint in unexpected yet deeply satisfying ways.

ANDREW: Absolutely. And I would like to emphasize that to a certain extent I do believe in a sort of pan-medievalism. That is to say, although Gothic and Romanesque architecture are different from Byzantine in many important ways, the generally mystical, liturgical, and God-fearing ethos of western medieval architecture is nevertheless also quite close to Byzantine architecture. Any of these medieval architectural styles are much closer in sensibility

to one another than they are to classical architecture. And so the arguments that the Victorian Gothic architects used to defend Gothic architecture against Neoclassical architecture are virtually the same arguments that can be used in favor of Byzantine architecture.

RTE: What happened to their influence? It's only in the last few decades that many of us have ever heard of things like the Arts and Crafts Movement.

ANDREW: There came a point in the 1930s and 1940s when all romantic Victorian art, whether Gothic revival architecture or pre-Raphaelite painting or Victorian romantic poetry, was utterly dismissed with absolute disdain by the modernist academics. It has only been recently that Victorian art has been rehabilitated and recognized by museums and universities as worthy of attention.

Discerning Beauty

RTE: Many of us recognize real beauty when we see it, but have no idea how to accomplish this ourselves. How did this sense of beautiful design come so naturally to our ancestors?

ANDREW: Well, I think the reason that it seemed so easy for historical people to create beautiful things was that they worked within such specific traditions. That is to say, they did not travel very much, and they always understood that the way their culture did things was the most practical according to their cultural circumstances. It would never have occurred to people historically to attempt to do something entirely different than the cultural norm. So by working within an established tradition there were not a lot of choices that they had to make. There was simply the way that each thing was done, and they would do it as beautifully as they could. The unique variations that would occur from one building to another would have primarily been driven by practical matters of program, site, and available materials, as opposed to an aesthetic agenda that an artist might attempt to impose upon a project.

Nowadays the only way we can work in tradition is first of all to deliberately reject the modernistic assumption that every work of art and architecture has to be unique and to express a new idea. Modernism is an incredibly difficult burden upon artists, and we see the evidence of this by looking at modern art and architecture and seeing how rarely it is successful, aesthetically or

practically. Few and far between are the great modernist buildings that actually look good and function well. This is not because modernist architects are any less skilled than architects historically. On the contrary, they are probably more highly trained than architects were historically, but this burden of trying to make every single thing completely new is too great a burden. Buildings are too complicated and the aesthetic judgment of the public is too entrenched for something completely new to have much chance of success.

So, if we choose to work traditionally we have to reject modernism, but we also have to choose what tradition in which to work, because we have the burden of being aware of every architectural and artistic style that has ever existed. Although this knowledge is a blessing, it is also a curse. To make things easy we really must narrow ourselves down, at least within a given project. We must decide what traditional framework we are going to operate in: "Among all the traditions that we know, which are we going to choose to forget while designing this project?"

I've been speaking of the process of creating art from the perspective of the artist, but I should also address the problem of recognizing beauty in general on the part of modern people. You say that many of us recognize beauty when we see it, but to a shocking extent many of us also don't recognize beauty when we see it, and modern media and entertainment provides us evidence that in fact many people prefer ugliness over beauty. So we can see that there is confusion in the eyes of modern people. This confusion comes about because of the plethora of imagery that is available in our modern lives. Historically, people would have existed within an artistically narrow culture, and would have known only the well-made beautiful things in their own culture. On the rare occasions in which they would have seen something from another culture, they were often quite confused by it.

Nowadays we don't live in a beautiful culture. We live in a world where most things around us are accidental, ill-considered, often deliberately sinful, and so modern people grow up without any obvious guide in their lives as to what is beautiful and what is ugly. This is a cultural problem that is extremely difficult to overcome. It's a problem that I find especially frustrating when I meet with churches and I try to explain to them why they should do something beautiful, and I discover that there are people on the building committee who don't even know what that means, who can't look at a beautiful church and distinguish it from an ugly church. I encounter this sometimes, and when I encounter it I generally discover that this is a per-

son who has never spent much time with old buildings. As is often the case with Americans, this may be a person who spends pretty much his entire life in suburbia where everything is asphalt and plastic. Such a person has no framework for understanding why solid authentic architecture is more appropriate than flimsy modern construction, and there is no easy way to fix this. If a person has not grown up with the ability to distinguish beautiful from ugly, it would take a lot of training and travel to remedy this.

I also find that for the sake of refining my own ability to see beauty, I must be very careful with what I look at because I am acutely aware that spending too much time looking at ugly things dulls one's sensitivity to beauty, and perhaps even creates a perverse attraction to ugly things through familiarity. So, I enforce a considerable discipline on myself to avert my eyes from ugly things, such as cheap buildings along suburban roads. There are some things I simply avoid looking at, when watching movies, for instance. I'm actually a big fan of movies that are well done and that have beautiful cinematography, but when I go to the theatre and the movie is preceded by previews for movies that are overtly ugly, I simply force myself to close my eyes because I'm aware of the damage it will cause to my perception of beauty if I look at such things.

RTE: Might our ancestors' understanding of design have partially come from using natural materials and building with their own hands? Would the use of such materials and the human techniques themselves *only* support "beautiful buildings," no matter how simple or rough-hewn they may be?

ANDREW: We must be careful of defining beauty too simply, although we can characterize certain principles as generally resulting in beauty. One of those principles would certainly be the use of materials in a way that is structurally or technologically logical given the nature of that material. Therefore we see it as natural and appropriate to build walls out of blocks of stone, because blocks of stone make a good strong wall and it is the nature of stone to want to be in a blocky shape. It likewise seems natural that wood would be used as long narrow beams and support a roof because it is the nature of wood to be long and narrow and strong in that way. It strikes us as natural and appropriate to see iron used for things like gates and fences because iron is expensive but very strong and the art of the blacksmith who works iron is well-suited to making things that are in the form of grills and curved bent shapes.

Opposite: Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul (Constantinople). Photo: A. Gould.



Certainly, part of the appeal of historic buildings is that they usually use building materials in a way that is structurally rational and appropriate for the craftsmen that work these materials. One of the problems with modernist architecture is that it sometimes uses natural materials more abstractly. Modernist architecture uses both stone and wood as veneers, cuts them into very thin layers and uses them to clad buildings that are built out of concrete or steel, and thus we see a sort of dishonest use of materials, or a belief that materials have no intrinsic nature, that all that matters is their superficial appearance. This is less satisfying to us, and clearly less iconic.

On the question of human touch, yes, things that are made by hand using traditional craft techniques tend to appeal to us because we can see how they are made and we can imagine ourselves making them in that way. We like the appearance of human-worked wood because we understand what it looks and feels like to work with an adze or a plane to smooth a board, and we like seeing chisel marks on stone because we understand how stone is chiseled. These textures also attract us because they resemble the natural surface of tree bark, the natural surface of broken stone, and so we feel that these organic handmade items preserve something of the natural qualities of these materials.

However, as I said, beauty is a complicated matter and we must be very cautious of making any of these simple observations into absolute principles because, on the other hand, there is tremendous beauty in stone or wood polished to utmost refinement. Historically people have always considered fine furniture with a French polish, or marble that is cut and polished absolutely smooth, to be the most beautiful. And so there is a side of beauty also that leans towards elegance and refinement. Likewise, we must recognize that there are many artificial things which have no resemblance to anything in nature that are intensely beautiful, such as the beauty of a fine machine, of clockwork mechanisms, for instance. These things appeal to us on a completely different level, perhaps because they show us that we ourselves are capable of creating wonderful things quite apart from nature.

As an artist I think it is usually unhelpful to think about whether things are beautiful or not on that kind of principled theoretical level. It is generally more useful to think about whether things are suited to their purpose. Is the particular aesthetic of any given material or any given surface finish effective for the practical use of the object, and for the artistic context of other objects that are used with it?

RTE: Do you think that plastics can ever be beautiful?

ANDREW: It's an interesting question. We have a bias against plastics that comes from their association with cheap manufactured goods. We tend to think of plastic as a cheap manufacturing substitute for ceramic or metal, and so we dislike it. Plastic also struggles to convey a specific material quality unique to itself because of its infinite ability to be melted and reformed. It essentially mimics any other material while having relatively little to say for itself in regards to its own nature. Nevertheless, there's nothing intrinsically ugly about plastic as a material. Had plastic been invented hundreds of years ago craftsmen would have probably come up with a way of using plastic in the context of traditional art that would have suited it as a material and would have baptized it into artistic tradition. But because this did not happen, and because plastic was invented during the modernistic period, and we've only ever seen it used as a modern substitute for better materials, it becomes very hard for us to see what the intrinsic beauty of plastic could actually be.

We can really only judge the aesthetic of plastic based on modern things that we can see that have been made out of plastic, not all of which are ugly. Some are quite astonishing looking. I have a plastic vacuum cleaner made by Dyson Ltd. which is quite a marvel to look at, so there have been some industrial designers who have figured out how to give a rather marvelous high-tech aesthetic to plastic goods. Would it be possible for a designer to give a good traditional aesthetic to plastic? I don't know if anyone has seriously tried. It would be very difficult.

RTE: What would you say to someone who asks how they might learn to beautifully furnish or decorate a house?

ANDREW: As I said earlier, many modern people have lost the ability to see beauty clearly because their vision has been so clouded by the ugliness and chaos of the modern world. It may be possible to heal such people's vision through careful discipline, isolation from ugly things, and exposure to traditional and beautiful things, but of course that would take a great deal of time and disruption in someone's life. It would take almost the artistic equivalent of joining a monastery. So, to people who are unable to decorate their houses on their own, I would simply recommend that they hire someone who is able to do it. Ask for help. Find someone who does beautiful design that feels comfortable, and ask for assistance.

American Church-Building

RTE: Andrew, you say, “We must feel architecture to be more than structure. Its geometries represent the highest truths and cannot be built casually or without dignity.” Although we will talk about this at greater length later, can you tell us briefly what has happened to American church building in this past century, and what hope you have of a return to living design?

ANDREW: In making this statement that the geometries of architecture cannot be taken casually, I was speaking specifically of the symbolic meaning behind certain forms and shapes in Byzantine church architecture. However, when you ask the question of what is wrong with modern American church building, I would say that we have to start at a much more basic level than these high questions of geometrical symbolism.

The essential problem with modern American church building is that it has not been conceived with a traditional liturgical agenda as the driving force behind the design. For instance, modern churches typically have a design that is flooded with light and which fails to achieve any sense of liturgical mystery, and we frequently see church buildings that are built with thin walls and steel structure and large areas of glass so that they seem light and ephemeral.

RTE: Some people would say that this feeling of ephemeral lightness seems more heavenly, that this natural light is like God’s grace pouring in upon them.

ANDREW: Yes, a good modern building flooded with white light can be beautiful and people will often call such a building uplifting or inspiring. But we need to remember that the purpose of liturgical architecture, of an Orthodox church, is not to uplift and inspire but to make us mindful of the presence of God and the saints. Traditional architecture does this iconographically by revealing the beauty of the uncreated light shining through the saints, through the icons, and by suggesting the veil of mystery and the cloud of witnesses around the altar. For this iconographic technology to be effective requires a certain dim and mysterious light so that the reflections of light off the gilded icons can be seen as brilliant and even supernatural in the setting of a dark church. A church that is flooded with natural light robs the icons of their ability to shine more brightly than the sun.

RTE: And is this why we prefer to use candles to electricity?

ANDREW: Exactly. Electric light can be just as problematic as too much natural light, especially if the electric light is in the form of spotlights which lend a theatrical atmosphere to the building. Even worse are canister lights recessed into the ceiling, which give an extremely boring light evenly distributed throughout the church, leaving no room for shadow and mystery. Electric lights can be alright in church if they are designed to illuminate in exactly the same way candlelight illuminates. They must be low-wattage bulbs on low-hanging chandeliers to give a gentle golden glow towards the center of the space that will reflect off the icons.

RTE: What other problems do we commonly find in American church building?

ANDREW: We typically see modern churches that have a sort of democratic focus on the people crowded into the nave, grouping those people around an altar in the center, or else people sitting in chairs on a sloping floor, theatre style. Many of the Protestant mega-churches do this and they would readily admit that their purpose is to uplift by entertainment. Even some Orthodox churches have this theatrical aspect with the altar higher up like a stage and the sloping theatre-style chairs. In these cases the architect and the building committee seem to have completely failed to understand the difference between a theatre for a stage show and a temple for participating in Divine Liturgy. We get the sense that the church is designed for the comfort of the people rather than for the honor of God.

All of these problems reflect influences from modernism that have affected American church design, because, of course, modernist architecture is all about lightness, structural engineering, rational expression, emphasizing the technological feats of modern materials, flooding things with light, and ultimately having a practical and democratic focus on the needs of man.

So the first thing we must do with American church building is to recognize that all of the fundamental tenets of modernist architecture are at odds with the traditional purpose of a church—which is to establish an ethos of solidity, mystery, and dignity to further the fear and worship of God in those who behold the temple. Once we have a correct understanding of the purpose of church architecture, then we will recognize that the solution to this design agenda can only be found in tradition. We will also give up on the



idea, again from modernism, that every church needs to look somehow new and unique. If we turn to tradition we will discover that the solutions to all of our problems with church building lie right before us.

RTE: Do you find that Orthodox churches that are being built now, perhaps by an established parish building on a new site, are more conscious of this than they were fifteen or twenty years ago? Is there a turn back towards tradition?

ANDREW: Certainly, and not only in Orthodoxy, but in many denominations, there is a desire for new churches to be traditional in style, and we see in both Orthodoxy and Catholicism new churches that are being built traditionally. However, we seldom find an example of a church that is entirely without destructive modernistic influence of some kind or another. Most frequently this influence comes in through attitudes toward building technology. For instance, we see churches built that appear to be completely modernistic while under construction, with all sorts of steel, concrete, and sheet rock used in very modern ways. Yet, then when the building is finished, this construction is hidden under a veneer of brick and plaster and looks from afar like an old stone church. Typically, the look is unconvincing. So we have this abstract and superficial attitude towards the appearance of buildings that we have to unlearn. The building needs to be conceived traditionally from the foundation up, and from the inside out. These historical forms and historical ornamentation only manifest their full significance if they are built and structured traditionally and not built superficially.

Incorporating Regional Materials and Styles

RTE: Let's speak now about your use of regional materials and styles, along with Byzantine or Russian designs for local churches. How does that work out in practice?

ANDREW: If we look at Orthodox churches in the various Orthodox nations we see a substantial variety, especially on the exteriors of the buildings. One of the things we observe is that the building materials vary according to what is available and according to the historic building tradition in these countries. So we see a lot of brick and marble in the Byzantine Greek world. In Russia we see brick and plaster but we see little stone, because stone was not

Opposite: Exterior design for Sts. Joseph and Andrew Church, Candler, NC.
Drawing by A. Gould.

historically quarried in Russia. In heavily-wooded countries we see architecture primarily made of logs, particularly in parish churches.

Secondly, we observe that this architecture is styled in a way to complement the landscape. So, for instance, in Greece where the landscape consists of white stony hills with soft and eroded profiles, we see Byzantine churches clinging to the side of these hills and crags, with buttressed sloping walls and round domes. The buildings, in a sense, resemble the very topography they are built upon, and therefore look very natural and organic in that setting. In contrast we look at Georgia, where the mountains are immensely tall and steep with jagged points, we see churches looking similarly tall and vertical with pointed domes; they look like they grew naturally out of those mountains. When we look at Romania, which is covered with dense dark forests, we see churches that have dark exteriors and angular pointed roof shapes that very often correspond to the shapes of the pine trees that surround them.

Russia is a particularly interesting case because Kievan Rus' imported Byzantine architecture beginning in the tenth century, and the first churches built in Russia looked very much like churches in Constantinople. But over time, we see that the Russians developed a new aesthetic for the exterior of the churches. Whereas the Greeks had always been content for the outsides of the churches to be somewhat utilitarian, the Russians developed an aesthetic whereby the outside of the church, covered with ornamentation and onion domes, expresses the divine spark within. Perhaps this is because the flatness of the Russian landscape and the brilliant whiteness of the Russian light make the church a more prominent intervention in the landscape than a church in Greece would be. The idea of Holy Russia—that the entirety of Russia is sanctified—made the Russians want to make their churches look like tongues of fire dotted across the landscape, as opposed to Byzantine churches, which tend to look like Christian fortifications in a hostile landscape.

I have a sense that the Greeks have always considered the natural landscape to be somewhat hostile to civilization. Because of its craggy topography, Greece and Asia Minor were difficult to farm and difficult to walk across. The coastal cities and islands historically have been infested with pirates and prone to enemy attack. Also, Greeks have always been particularly cognizant of the pagan idea of chaos, that the landscape is a sort of chaotic and hostile territory infested with dragons and demons. In that sense, to take a journey of any length outside the villages is likely to be perilous.

RTE: And Russians didn't view nature in the same way?

ANDREW: No, I have not ever had a sense that the Russians think of Russia as being infested with demons and monsters the way classical Greeks described it. This is ironic because nowadays we think of the Mediterranean as a sort of natural paradise and we think of Russia as being a frozen and inhospitable wilderness, but I think the cultural sensibility of these nations is perhaps the opposite, that the Russians see their own land as a garden of paradise with beautiful birch forests, flower gardens, and rich soil—everything flat and arable. And the Russians seem to believe that with the coming of Christianity the very soil of Russia has been sanctified, that the earth itself converted. I don't think the Greeks have ever felt that.

So when I design a church I have to choose which style of Orthodox architecture to use for any given project. And so the first thing I do is to look at the landscape where the church is meant to be built. For instance, if it is in the Southwest desert, then I will strongly consider starting the design of the church in the style of Syrian or Egyptian churches that exist in a similar-looking desert landscape. If it is a heavily wooded part of the country then I will look at the architecture of Romania and Serbia, and if it is in the plains of the Midwest then I will think particularly about Russian architecture. So that's one starting point.

The next thing to consider is the indigenous architectural tradition that exists in that area of America. In New England and Pennsylvania we might look at the refined and simple architectural tradition that comes from colonial English architecture, from Shaker architecture, and from eighteenth-century farmhouses and barns. This extremely simple, dignified, and refined architecture may give us precedents that the aesthetic of the church should reflect.

Texas, California, and New Mexico have a tradition of Spanish mission architecture which is a rustic and simplified Spanish Baroque. Spanish mission architecture is extremely conformant with an Orthodox liturgical ethos and many of the Spanish mission churches look very similar to 17th-century churches on the Greek islands. Likewise, there's a building tradition in the American southwest that goes back literally thousands of years using adobe, round wooden beams, covered wooden porches, and so forth.

In less historic parts of the United States, such as the Southeast, the Midwest, the Northwest, we primarily seen an architectural history dominated by Victorian architecture, and we see examples of older American churches

built in the Victorian style with ornate exterior trim and bold paint colors. This is also a good historic precedent we can work with. I think it is very important to honor and respect these local building traditions and use them in churches whenever possible.

In each of these cases, the importance and benefit of using these local historic influences and a stylistic character that complements the natural landscape is that it makes the church seem like it naturally belongs in that region. This will give people a sense of ownership, belonging, and connectedness to the past that will strengthen their faith. We should recognize that it is a weakness of Orthodox Christianity that it is a transplant from distant and culturally exotic parts of the world. The very cultural connectedness that is a strength of Orthodoxy in the Old World may be a weakness of Orthodoxy in the New World, and we need to do what we can to unite Orthodoxy with those aspects of artistic tradition that are good and compatible here in America. We need to baptize those things into Orthodoxy so that our faith may not seem as so exotic and unrooted here.

RTE: Creating something beautiful and familiar may also draw those who aren't yet acquainted with Orthodoxy.

ANDREW: Absolutely. People react positively to a building constructed according to their own local stylistic tradition. They see this as respectful to them. Also, people sometimes react to an ethnic Orthodox church as a sort of cultural affront. They may look at the church and think, "These people think they are better than us. These people don't want to belong to our culture. They want to stand apart." And they take this as insulting. But if they see a Russian or Greek Orthodox church built in a style that isn't quite Greek or Russian, but rather looks recognizably local, they will say, "These people respect us. These people recognize things that are good in our place and want to unite that to their own tradition." There is certainly evangelistic value to that, just as there is spiritual value for the Orthodox people who are doing it, because there is never spiritual benefit to living in arrogant isolation and thinking that you already know the best way of doing everything. Rather, always be on the lookout for goodness wherever you are able to find it. Having the humility to unite that goodness to your own traditions is spiritually beneficial.

Furthermore, as a practical matter, it would be very difficult in this day and age in America to build a replica medieval Russian church. The build-

ing materials, the artistic skills required, practical matters of cost and constructability, would all make such a project unrealistic. So, from a technical standpoint, discovering what building practices and artistic traditions exist here and are compatible with an Orthodox ethos may simply be necessary in order to build a good Orthodox church.

RTE: Thank you, Andrew, for this rich introduction to Orthodox architecture. You've given us much to consider, and we will return to this theme in the next issue of *Road to Emmaus* (#64, Winter 2016), where we will discuss how both well-established parishes and small missions can incorporate these principles of Orthodox architecture and furnishing into their church building. ✦

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Following: Design for interior and exterior of St. Maximus the Confessor Orthodox Church, Denton, TX. Drawings by A. Gould.

