



Images of the Invisible God

How icons avoid idolatry

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider a time you've viewed religious art or iconography. What made the experience meaningful? Did the art represent God, either in an abstract or corporeal form? What features of the artwork were you especially drawn to? Have you ever had the experience of feeling "addressed" by a work of religious art?

2. Consider the remark of Reimer's Dutch Reformed friend: "I love religious art, and yet I always feel a little bit like I shouldn't—like perhaps my love of aesthetics is overriding any genuinely theological consideration of imagery." How would you respond to her? Is there anything in this sentiment that resonates with you?

3. This essay traces a process, spanning hundreds of years, whereby visual representations of God have become ubiquitous. What effect has this transformation had on the spiritual lives of Christians? Do you agree with Reimer that the power of representational images has remained the same, but that we've become anesthetized to the art's effects?

4. The essay praises the Orthodox practice of "providing bounds" on what constitutes a "valid representation" of God. How should iconographers represent God with humility? Do you find this practice worthwhile? What specific guidelines in Orthodox practice do you see as especially important?

5. Reimer notes that, in the Orthodox tradition, "the saints and the fathers of the Church are considered icon-painters every bit as much as the craftsmen who produce the physical images." What would it mean to live the life of an icon-painter, without once picking up a brush? In a world saturated with depictions of God, what would it mean to develop a "disciplined gaze"?

6. Reimer writes, "For Christians, it is the Incarnation that makes possible the conditions in which we are not ultimately destroyed by the consuming fire of God's presence." What does the Incarnation mean for Christian art? Does it permit attempts to represent God the Father in art?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Thomas Merton, "Reality, Art, & Prayer," March 1955: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/reality-art-prayer>

Jeff Reimer, "Giving the Sickness a Name," July 2021: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/giving-sickness-name>

James Bernard Murphy, "The Advent of Christian Art," December 2016: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/advent-christian-art>

Paul Elie, "The Glory of Byzantium," June 2004: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/glory-byzantium>

Robert Kiely, "The Catholic Rubens," January 2015: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/catholic-rubens>

W. H. Auden, "Art in Natural, Revealed, & Christian Religion," November 1942:
<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/art-natural-revealed-christian-religion-part-1>