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The neoplatonic substructure of Russian Orthodox iconography and theology

Emile Alexandrov
University of Notre Dame, Fremantle, Australia
University of Tyumen, Tyumen, Russian Federation
e.aleksandrov@utmn.ru

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Abstract. This paper aims to uncover the underlying Neoplatonic ideas embedded in Russian Orthodox iconography and theology. The focus is on two earlier figures of Neoplatonism, namely, Iamblichus and Plotinus. In Iamblichus, his determination of religious practices or theurgy as imperative for union with God is emphasised. This includes his utilisation of symbols and icons for heightening the worshipper's faith, a practice that Russian Orthodoxy largely appropriated into a Christian context. However, the understanding of Beauty that both Iamblichus and Russian Orthodoxy incorporated is propelled out of Plotinus' ontology set in the *Enneads*. The suffusion of Plotinean ontology and Iamblichean theurgy resulted in the Orthodox portrayal of a divine ladder symbolising assimilation with God. This theological symbolism is markedly adopted by central figures of Eastern Orthodox theology and artistically rendered in Orthodox icons, such as the 12th-century icons *Ladder of Divine Ascent* and the *Faith, Hope, and Love*. Both icons are also closely intertwined with the theological texts of Eastern Orthodoxy, especially the *Philokalia*, which is permeated with Neoplatonic themes that portray a deep historical trajectory of influence that this paper hopes to have better elucidated.

Keywords: Russian Orthodoxy, iconography, visual theology, Ladder of Ascent, St. John Climacus, icon, symbol, Iamblichus, Plotinus, Pavel Florensky, Neoplatonism.

Неоплатоническая субструктура в русской православной иконографии и теологии

Э. Александров
Университет Нотр-Дам, Фримантл, Австралия
Тюменский государственный университет, Тюмень, Российская Федерация
e.aleksandrov@utmn.ru

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Аннотация. Цель данной статьи – раскрыть неоплатонические идеи, глубоко укоренённые в русской православной иконографии и теологии. Автор уделяет основное внимание двум ранним фигурам неоплатонизма, а именно Ямвлиху и Плотину. У Ямвлиха явно прослеживается его определение религиозных практик, или теургии, как императива для единения с Богом. Эти практики включают в себя использование символов и образов для укрепления веры – методику, которую русское православие в значительной степени адаптировало к христианскому контексту. Однако понимание красоты как у Ямвлиха, так и в русском православии исходит из онтологии Плотина, изложенной в *Эннеадах*. Слияние плотиновской онтологии и ямвлиховой теургии привело к православному изображению Божественной Лествицы, символизирующей союз с Богом. Эта теологическая символика очевидным образом заимствована центральными фигурами восточной православной теологии и художественно представлена в православных иконах, таких как иконы XII века *Лестница Божественного восхождения* и *Вера, Надежда и Любовь*. Обе иконы также тесно связаны с богословскими текстами восточного православия, особенно с *Филокалией*, которая пропитана неоплатоническими темами. Эти темы отражают глубокую историческую траекторию влияния, которую, как мы надеемся, лучше прояснит предлагаемая статья.

Ключевые слова: русское православие, иконография, визуальная теология, Лестница Восхождения, св. Иоанн Лествичник, икона, символ, Ямвлих, Плотин, Флоренский, неоплатонизм.

At some point between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the Russian Orthodox icon, which was developed from out of the Byzantine model, became the “one and only symbol of faith” [Kondakov 2019, 7]. In fact, during these earlier centuries of Russian history, the veneration of icons surpassed the practices customary of the ancient conventions it inherited. Due to its reliance on the craftsmanship of the woodworkers and the expansive forests utilised for their craft, Russian Orthodox iconography inevitably developed into the new category of ‘devotional (in Rus. *моленная*) icon’ [Kondakov 2019, 39]. While the focus of this article is not on the iconographical distinctions between the Russian and the Byzantine variants, it nonetheless is essential to recognise that the Eastern Orthodox appropriation of the Neoplatonic heritage

resulted in a distinctly Russian iconography and theology[1]. Nevertheless, one is obligated to trace this iconographical development to its Greek roots to acknowledge that Orthodox icons exhibit a perpetual developmental trajectory that includes several distinct phases within Russian history. We will focus on two crucial figures that contributed to this iconographical development: Iamblichus and Plotinus. The results are iconographical depictions of various Neoplatonic themes in Christian garb, with beauty, theurgy, and the ascending ladder central to these portrayals. In the written tradition, this resulted in the *Philokalia*, a consortium of ascetic writings that serve as the preeminent spiritual and contemplative text of the Russian Orthodox tradition.

These developments, however, had strictly begun with the iconography of the Pre-Modern Rus', a period that scholars have shown to be less focused on verbal religious practices, having instead "compensated with iconography and its symbolism" [Goldfrank 2020, 3–6]. By the thirteenth century, the icon was an integral part of the lived Orthodox tradition of Russia, often used to revere religious and military figures alike [Goldfrank 2020, 5–6]. As such, the icon was indispensable in forming Russian religious life, culture and lived experience. There is, however, the formation of a written and theological dimension unique to Russian Orthodoxy, which is just as profoundly philosophical as it is theological. In its capacity to purvey hidden or otherwise indirect meanings beyond the scope of discursive language, Orthodox iconography outgrew the tradition and practices of the Ancient Christian East via Byzantium. Although the inauguration of Russian Orthodox iconography is indeed traceable to the eleventh-century aesthetics of Hagia Sophia in Kiev and Novgorod, both also appropriated the Platonic philosophy of transcendence of the Eastern Christian fathers [Evdokimov 1990, 165–167]. The indirect apprehension of revelation and its mysteries through icons, however, is not merely reflective of the Orthodox adoption of Platonic remembrance (ἀνάμνησις), but an "epiphanic calling forth" (ἐπιφάνεια) whereby the icons in question act as symbolic mediators that portray meanings beyond simple sight [Evdokimov 1990, 166].

It is precisely here that the iconography of Russian Orthodoxy is demonstrably Neoplatonic, where the regular deliberation of theological or philosophical texts is overcome through non-verbal symbols (σύμβολον). In practice, an indirect invocation is employed, and in expanding on the Eastern Christian fathers' Neoplatonism, Orthodoxy affirmed sensory perception as a hindrance to true spirituality. As Florensky explained, due to the "weakness of the spiritual vision of the worshippers (*немощности духовного зрения молящихся*)" and the "spiritual lethargy (*духовной вялости*)", the Church must "grant an allowance (*пристраивать некоторое пособие*)" for heavenly visions through the icon in its material iconostasis [Florensky 1996, 442]. These Neoplatonic elements are exceedingly prominent concerning overcoming the strictures of language and discursive thought. This also shows that Russian Orthodoxy had incorporated Byzantine iconography and its hold over the crucial aspects of the Classical Greek world and Neoplatonism into its theology [Kokosalakis 1995, 434–440]. However, the theology of Russian Orthodoxy represents several vital factors that need to be laid out before proceeding.

[1] For scholarly coverage of the relationship between the Russian and Byzantine iconography, see: Kitzinger 1954, 83–150 and Uspensky 1976, 49–55, Cavarnos 2001, 61–106, and for pictorial demonstrations, see: Vorob'ev 1986 and Temple 1974.

Firstly, the icon projects a non-verbal and non-discursive connection to the divine, a "spirituality through materiality" [Kokosalakis 1995, 440]. The icon thusly represents a mystical language by way of image, a mysterious discourse with the divine. To achieve this non-verbal exchange, the icon simultaneously stimulates the religious adherent's imagination, emotions and rational mind beyond the confines of regular deliberation. While silent prayer may be involved, it need not invoke specific rites, for the icon *is* the visual stimulus for strengthening the religious adherent's bond to the divine. In other words, Russian Orthodox 'visual theology' is distinct from regular liturgical practice in that it "can make an incursion into sonorous territories", demonstrating a conflation of the textual, auditory and visual approach to theology [Harvey 2021, 27]. The Orthodox icon, therefore, is to be understood as the proverbial bridge between the incorporeal divine and the corporeal world of perception. While this can infer a religious aestheticism of sorts, the crucial point here is, again, the role of the icon as a strictly non-discursive inspirational instrument for the worshipper, as the "Russian icon speaks exclusively in the rarefied language of mystical knowledge" [Temple 1990, 31]. In inspiring the worshipper, the icon can communicate in a way that grants a path to the divine, which is not unattainable through regular theology or rational deliberation. This brief explication is not intended to exhaust the theology of the Russian Orthodox iconography, nor is it being endorsed here as superior to regular Christian liturgy and prayer. However, the Neoplatonic elements become more visible when observing several core features of Orthodox iconography.

Before exploring the Neoplatonic elements, the subject matter of the inherent beauty of the Orthodox icon needs to be pre-empted. It must be said *ab initio*, that the corporeal beauty of the icon itself has no intrinsic divine power. Despite this, the icon's visual dimension is crafted to propagate the divine beyond regular aesthetics. Apprehending this resulting beauty is, however, incumbent upon the religious adherents' faith concurrently with the apperception of the icon, for it is through this interdependency that one initiates communication with the divine. This is not unlike liturgy and prayer, where one's piety serves as the precursor. The icon, however, instigates the worshiper's communion with its beauty from out of the beautiful imagery it presents corporeally; it draws the religious adherent towards itself, enacting a "sharp (*острое*), soul-piercing (*пронзающее душу*) sense of the reality of the spiritual world" which is like a sudden "shock (*удар*)" or "burn (*ожог*)" that impacts near-all who are exposed to the icon for the first time [Florensky 1996, 449]. The icon pulls one into the sacred space of its beauty, but the seeing, in this case, is beyond regular sight and qualitatively superior to the experiential world despite disbelief in one's own experience, for this icon testifies to an "overwhelming victorious beauty (*всепреодолевающей победной красоте*)" [Florensky 1996, 449].

The artist, therefore, must 'in some way' reflect the divine through the beauty in the icon, reminiscent of Proclus' recounting of those who "in some way (ποιεῖσθαί πῃ)" invoke the divine (Timaeus Commentary Book 2: 217.28–218.2). The icon casts the mysterious drawing power of the divine; the transcendent bridge mediates the worshipper's communion with God. Thus, for Russian Orthodoxy, the icon must be a reflection of God's Beautiful divine essence; "beauty itself as the Orthodox Church understands it, is not a beauty belonging to the creature, but an attribute of the Kingdom of God where God is all in all" [Ouspensky, Lossky 1999, 35]. For Russian Orthodoxy, the

beauty of the icon in its drawing power reveals the worshipper's potential openness to limitless Beauty, a promise incumbent upon one's faithful resonance with the icon, *not* a corporeal exhibit of the completeness of the Beauty of God. For the complete divine Beauty of God cannot be presented through the icon's corporeality and its dependence on bodily perception; "I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (1 Corinthians 15:50–51).

Religious practices involving icons and symbols far precede the Byzantine tradition, with a major influence on Christian iconography traceable to the Syrian philosopher-priest Iamblichus (245–325 AD). The craftsman's reproduction of divine beauty in the icon, however, is more a product of Plotinus' (204–270 AD) perspective that the artist should not imitate nature but the Platonic forms, an idea that Orthodoxy developed further [Kenna 1985, 351–352]. As scholars of Neoplatonism attest, Iamblichus, who was likely a student of Plotinus and Porphyry (234–301 AD), diverged from both by prioritising certain religious practices for communion with the divine. While for Plotinus, rigorous philosophical contemplation is sufficient for reaching union with the divine, Iamblichus instead advocated various spiritual practices as the prerequisite, specifically "theurgy" (θεουργία) or 'divine work'. As Struck explained, while all three in Iamblichus, Porphyry and Plotinus agreed on the incapacity of the cognitive mind to attain union with the divine, Iamblichus asseverated theurgical rites that "center on the invocation of a god, who becomes mysteriously present to the celebrants in a votive statue, through a rite of consecration", with key elements of the ritual being "symbols" that can have a special affiliation with the divine, i.e., words, stones, herbs [Struck 2004, 211]. This shows that rudimentary communion with the divine through symbols was incipient in Iamblichus well before the formation of the Russian Orthodox tradition. Moreover, the Neoplatonist tradition regarded symbols as containing inherent powers of divine invocation and that any disagreement was a matter of priority, not foundational.

Iamblichus' prioritisation of theurgy was nevertheless idiosyncratic even within the Neoplatonist tradition; an unprecedented event resulted in a strict suffusion of philosophy and theology within history [Dillon 2004, xix–xx]. As such, Iamblichus may prove to be a central character in the earlier development of early Christian culture and religion, including "how Christian liturgy, the sacramental practice of the Church and the metaphysics of the Incarnation owe a perhaps significant debt to the pagan Platonic tradition" [Shaw 2014, v–vi]. Essentially, the later formation of Russian Orthodox iconography and its theology is considerably indebted to Iamblichus' philosophical enterprise. As Losev maintained, the aesthetic value of the Russian Orthodox Church is grounded in 'pagan Neoplatonism,' for the Church appealed to the Neoplatonists in developing their aesthetics. Specifically, in Iamblichus, "Losev locates aesthetic generalisation on the basis of moral decisions" [Dolgopolski 2018, 81–82]. In other words, it is not just iconography and symbolism that is traceable to Iamblichus but also the Orthodox value of beauty that is crucial to its theology. As Losev further professed, this took the form of Iamblichean hymns and prayers coupled with logic and dialectics as a demonstration of later pagan syncretism that was eventually overcome by the Judaic and Christian traditions [Losev 1957, 515]. However, not without first having absorbed aspects of these practices into Orthodoxy.

The symbol, integral to the philosophy of Iamblichus, is one such feature to have inundated Orthodox Christian religiosity. There is also evidence of the now-lost Iamblichean treatise entitled *On Symbols,* which supposedly dealt with the topic at length that was likely accessible to early Church fathers. Iamblichus' symbology is based on the belief that the divine is not present in the corporeal form on earth but indirectly through symbols that can take many forms depending on the historical-theological circumstance, be it icons, myths, rituals or prayer. This latitudinarian approach allowed Iamblichus to aggregate various practices of the Egyptians, Greeks and Phoenicians under a unified theological umbrella – with every tradition free to present its own particular religious practices unabated. This malleability and openness to tradition allowed Iamblichean theurgy to be absorbed seamlessly into the formation of early Christianity. To focus specifically on features of Iamblichus' theurgy that the Orthodox tradition inherited, we must turn to his *De Mysteriis* where he makes the most elaborate defence of theurgy. It is important to note that Iamblichus wrote *De Mysteriis* in response to Plotinus' student Porphyry and his ostensible attack on theurgy in his *Letter to Anebo* [Addey 2014, 127–169][2]. To support his thesis, Iamblichus explained that his emphasis on an unsystematic and non-conceptual basis for theurgy is consistent with the "sacred mystagogy (ἱερατικῆς μυσταγωγίας)", where "the works of theurgy performed on any given occasion, some have a cause that is secret and superior to all rational explanation (κρείττονα λόγου), others are like symbols (σύμβολα) consecrated from all eternity to the higher beings, others preserve some other image (εἰκόνα)" (De Mysteriis (1) 11.5–7). Notice here the use of the term for image 'εἰκόνα' ('icon'), which the translators of the volume explained that Iamblichus had regularly used for literary variance, alternating between εἰκόνα and σύμβολα depending on the context [Iamblichus 2003, 47]. Notwithstanding this crucial term, the differences in the practice of theurgy reflect circumstantial variability, i.e., socio-historical and cultural. These differences thence influence its presentation through the icon (εἰκόνα), despite remaining steadfast in aiming at communication with the divine beyond rational contemplation.

It is here that the εἰκόνα that is central to Russian Orthodoxy aligns with the Iamblichean inception. Russian Orthodoxy represents its own circumstantial context, a practice that explicitly reflects the Russian religious historicality. Iamblichean theurgy's openness to the tradition effectively allowed for elements of his theology to become colligated into the theological substructure of Russian iconography in a way that promulgated his strand of Neoplatonic ontology. Central to Russian Orthodoxy's adoption of Iamblichus' ontology, however, is the understanding that the εἰκών exhibits the divine's consecration in the corporeal hypostasis, which must be accessed concurrently with religious practices. Regardless of whether this is a pagan or Orthodox practice, Iamblichus would explain that "our general explanation of the

[2] It is important to note that Addey's thesis in this seminal work is outside of the mainstream consensus. Addey argues that Iamblichus and Porphyry were not in disagreement, nor were they engaged in a serious debate, rather the two had in actuality been in agreement from the start. In Addey's view, Porphyry posed questions and problems in his treatise which he had already expected to be resolved. In so doing, both Porphyry and Iamblichus composed a Platonic dialectical exchange of sorts, where the question and answer was intended to provide for a deeper understanding of the nature theurgy than regular treatises would allow. This also means that Porphyry, contrary to scholarly consensus, may have also endorsed theurgy [Addey 2014, 129–143].

unsullied mode of divine worship (ἀχράντου θρησκείας): it confers upon all other beings an intimate attachment (συναρμοζομένης) to the classes superior to us (τοῖς κρείττοσιν ἡμῶν)" (De Mysteriis (1) 11.29–30). This consistency between Orthodox iconography and Iamblichus' symbolic theurgy reveals the important relationship between the incorporeal divine and the corporeality of the worshipper. As Florensky explained in *Iconostasis* (*Иконостас*), the altar of the temple signifies God's invisible divinity. In contrast, iconostasis is the "boundary that separates the visible (*миром видимым*) and the invisible world (*миром невидимым*)", a "vision (*видение*)" that allows for this boundary of the alter to materialise, making it accessible to our consciousness through its "unified row of saints or cloud of witnesses (*облаком свидетелей*) that surrounds the Throne of God (*Престол Божий*)" [Florensky 1996, 441].

Commensurately, Iamblichus' symbol serves as the bridge for his described 'intimate attachment' (συναρμοζομένης) with the divinity, and it is the "other types of divine symbol (θεῖα συνθήματα) that have the capacity of raising us up to the gods", that which is to be "enabled to link us (συνάπτειν) to them" (De Mysteriis (1) 12.39–41). For both Orthodox religious practices and Iamblichus, the symbol and prayer intertwine. This also means that both Orthodox iconography and Iamblichean theurgy allow the worshipper to enter the sacred space of divinity through spiritual practice. This bridge leads to one's connection to the divine from within the material plane. For Iamblichus, this is the missing link that his predecessors overlooked, having overemphasised the contemplative act whilst neglecting theurgy and the power of symbols. Furthermore, for Orthodoxy and Iamblichus, the icon or symbol must embrace the drawing power of Beauty; as noted earlier vis-à-vis Florensky, the icon emanates a triumphant beauty that overwhelms. Iamblichus, like Florensky, saw this overwhelming power as an exhibition of the beauty of the symbol; "divine appearances flash forth a beauty almost irresistible (τὰ μὲν θεῖα κάλλος οἷον ἀμήχανον ἀπαστράπτει), seizing those beholding it with wonder, providing a wondrous cheerfulness (εὐφρόσύνην), manifesting itself with ineffable symmetry (ἀρρήτῳ δὲ τῇ συμμετρίᾳ), and transcending in comeliness all other forms" (De Mysteriis (2) 3.54–55).

It is important to note that Florensky recognised the Iamblichean influence on Russian Orthodoxy, having studied Iamblichus and originally intended to compose his Master of Divinity dissertation on a translation of Iamblichus' works, hence the resemblance in exposition and perspective [Trubachev 1990, 351][3]. An example of this influence is especially evident in the *Iconostasis*, where Florensky expanded upon Iamblichean dreams further, explaining that dreams depict the border between sleep and wakefulness. In Florenksy's view, the soul, during sleep, inhabits the boundary between the heavenly and earthly, much like the icon's captivation of the worshipper. For both Florensky and Iamblichus, therefore, a dream can be another type of "sign" or "symbol" of the soul's transition from one world to another [Florensky 1996, 441–453] and (De Mysteriis (3) 2.1–58). Florensky's iconographical views were not always well-received, especially evident in his contemporary Florovsky, who claimed that Florensky moved away from Christianity and closer to Platonism and the occult

[3] As Antonova noted, Florensky's understanding of the Russian icon's prominence are based on two grounds, as "an element of the religious revival in Russia" and as an "emblem of the great Russian nation". The icon remained an integral component of Florensky's thought [Antonova 2010, 74–75].

[Florovsky 1937, 495]. Contra Florovsky, however, Florensky was not contradicting Orthodoxy but revealing its Neoplatonic roots. Hence, both Florensky and Iamblichus endorsed beauty as the fundamental prerequisite for iconography and theology, or as Shaw explained regarding the latter, from "a theurgic perspective, embodiment itself became a divine service, a way of manifesting the will and beauty of the gods" [Shaw 2014, 25]. Theurgy aims to manifest a transcendent Beauty beyond the beauty of perceptibles, a hallmark of Neoplatonism built on Plotinus' teachings.

It is, however, important to stress that the Russian Orthodox tradition did not have a direct, unadulterated link to Iamblichean works. Despite the Church fathers' likely exposure to Iamblichus' writings, as scholars regularly show, "Neoplatonism in general was simply the philosophy of the Church Fathers of the 4th c. and afterward" [Prokurat et al. 1996, 236]. The Orthodox tradition instead appropriated elements that had already incurred a process of filtration and modification throughout Late Antiquity. Moreover, Iamblichus advocated Pagan Neoplatonism, whereas Christianity deviated from Paganism despite various consistencies. Neoplatonic elements become visible only after examining Russian Orthodox theology, as Florensky and Temple argued. Other scholars, such as Siedell, showed the consistencies between Radical Orthodoxy's "revival of Greek Neoplatonic thought, particularly the theurgical tradition of Iamblichus and Proclus" and the Orthodox theology of Florensky and other Russian philosophers [Siedell 2008, 141–142][4]. Theurgy's historical trajectory following Iamblichus is traceable to Proclus (412–485 AD), the last major philosopher of Late Antiquity who incorporated Iamblichus' program into his own philosophical project, and then onward to the obscure Christian Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite who synthesised Biblical scripture with Neoplatonism [Gersh 1978, 125–129]. While the latter had not mentioned Iamblichus by name, adopting the Proclean philosophy entails Iamblichean perfusion. Thus, a direct link between Iamblichus, Proclus, Pseudo-Dionysius and Russian Orthodoxy is discernable, hence the latter's description by some scholars as a form of baptised Neoplatonism [Kharlamov 2016, 140]. Moreover, Pseudo-Dionysius' adoption of Proclus' ontology was not formally recognised until the work of German theologians of the later nineteenth century, having previously considered to be the authentic writings of the first-century Bishop of Athens Dionysius the Areopagite [Stiglmayr 1895; Koch, 1895]. This brief historical detour must be considered when exploring the overt consistencies in Orthodoxy and Neoplatonism more generally.

The perceivable beauty of lived experience for Neoplatonism is an inferior reflection of the higher imperceptible beauty. In Plotinus, more specifically, these inferior reflections such as symbols and icons link the human being to the higher beauty, "the role of the symbol which describes, by reference to the knowable and visible, that which cannot be known and seen: 'All teems with symbol'" [Temple 1990, 73]. This is the intrinsic feature of Plotinus' totalising cosmology; divine Beauty percolates through all of reality; it is found in symbols, songs and rhythms just as it is found in actions, habits and virtues

[4] Radical Orthodoxy is a characterisation of the contemporary application of theurgy in Christianity, most notably by John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock. Milbank argued that any distinction between reason and revelation is a modern corruption, and that theology is needed along with philosophy for the human being's co-operation with divine work. In Pickstock's view, the Eucharistic liturgy is a demonstration of such theurgic performance in the Christian context, see: Milbank et al. 1999.

(Ennead 1 (1) § 1.6.1:1–6). From this emanationist ontology, Plotinus determined divine Beauty never to be 'personified' since it cannot manifest its completeness in corporeal form. It is, however, indirectly inferable through "an idea, a philosophical concept, or possibly a mathematical symbol" [Temple 1990, 73]. The consummation of said indirect inference is in the human being's assimilation with the divine. This is also incumbent upon one's successful contemplative pursuit of a particular perceptible beauty manifest in symbols and icons. While the icon or symbol heretofore serves as somewhat of a stepping stone for Plotinus, it remains mandatory for reaching the imperceptible beauty of the divine. The indebtedness to Plato's 'Diotima's Ladder' of the *Symposium* (Symp. 211 a–d) is evident here. However, Plotinus' further development of Platonic ascension proved crucial for Orthodox iconography, which is more on in a moment.

Plotinus clarified union with the divine, not as assimilation to "good human beings", which is like "making an image of an image (ὡς εἰκὼν εἰκόνι)", but rather, "making an image according to a paradigm (πρὸς ἄλλον ὡς πρὸς παράδειγμα)" (Ennead 1 (19) § 1.2.7:28–30). The paradigm in question is one of divine Beauty, which Plotinus maintained emanates throughout the corporeal world whilst also acting as somewhat of a gateway for entering the divine. This metaphorical gateway is present in the form of an image (εἰκὼν) of the divine, which Eastern Orthodoxy adopted, especially by the "Christian theologians who, in defence of icons, spoke of *prototype* and *image*" [Temple 1990, 77]. Essentially, one's entering the pace of the icon's beauty apropos Florensky's depiction is central to Plotinus' ontology:

> What, then, should we think if someone sees pure Beauty (καλὸν) itself by itself, not contaminated by flesh or bodies, not on the earth or in heaven, in order that it may remain pure (καθαρόν)? For all these things are added on and have been mixed in and are not primary (ἐπακτὰ πάντα ταῦτα καὶ μέμικται καὶ οὐ πρῶτα); rather, they come from the Good. If, then, one sees that which orchestrates everything, remaining by itself while it gives everything, though it does not receive anything into itself, if he remains in sight of this and enjoys it by assimilating himself to it (μένων ἐν τῇ θέᾳ τοῦ τοιούτου καὶ ἀπολαύων αὐτοῦ ὁμοιούμενος), what other beauty would he need? For this, since it is itself supremely beautiful (μάλιστα κάλλος) and the primary beauty, makes its lovers beautiful and lovable" (Ennead 1 (1) § 1.6.7:21–30).

In the context of assimilation with the divine, the Good and divine Beauty are interchangeably used customary of the Hellenic-Platonic expression, which the Christian variant essentially recycles in its own language, i.e., Plotinus' supreme beauty (μάλιστα κάλλος) and Florenskii's triumphant Beauty (*победная красота*).

Furthermore, Plotinus's assimilation is complimented by purification through virtues, dialectics and contemplation. In its Christian appropriation, faith is certainly the more crucial precursor, hence the appeal of Iamblichean theurgy. This is primarily due to the overt emphasis on prayer and spiritual practices in Iamblichus' writings. While not as exoteric, faith remains integral for assimilating with God in Plotinus' *Enneads*. To be clear, for Plotinus, just as for Iamblichus, faith is obligatory for purification. As Plotinus attested, "in acts of sense-perception, too, truth is not found (αἰσθήσεσιν, οἶμαι, οὐκ ἔνεστιν ἀλήθεια), but only belief (ἀλλὰ δόξα), because belief is receptive (παραδεχομένη)", and therefore, open to truth (Ennead 5 (32) § 5.5.1:62–65). Plotinus is here referring to the

real immutable truth of the Intellect that cannot be attained through the senses (Ennead 5 (32) § 5.5.2:10–25). It follows that truth can be found only through belief in the Intellect's Beauty, a prerequisite for ascending toward assimilation. The apex of said ascent is in that which is "seated or settled above Intellect, as if on a sort of beautiful pedestal (ὑπερίδρυται ἐπὶ καλῆς οὕτως οἷον κρηπῖδος)" (Ennead 5 (32) § 5.5.3: 5–7). God in Plotinian language is the 'One' who proceeds through the Intellect as a "Great King (μᾶλλον βασιλικώτερα)" proceeds to a lesser king, whilst having "an indescribable beauty (κάλλος ἀμήχανον) leading its way" (Ennead 5 (32) § 5.5.3:7–13). Divine Beauty hereby leads the ascension process concurrently with belief and contemplation, as Plotinus further elaborated:

> After all these, the Great King suddenly reveals himself (προφαίνεται ἐξαίφνης), with the people praying (εὔχονται) to him and prostrating (προσκυνοῦσιν) themselves, at least those who have not already left, thinking that it was enough to see those who preceded the king (Ennead 5 (32) § 5.5.3:11–15).

For Plotinus, therefore, contemplation cannot complete the purification and can only reach the preceding king, not the Great King, the One God. Essentially, prayer and prostration (εὔχονται καὶ προσκυνοῦσιν) are needed for the Great King to be revealed suddenly. Belief is indispensable for reaching the summit of ascension, where contemplation and identity dissipate in union with God. It is this Neoplatonist ontology that propelled Orthodox iconography into maturity.

This emerges in the Russian Orthodox iconographical illustration of 'ladders' or 'stairs', harking back to Plato's *Symposium*, where the ascent from beautiful particulars to Beauty itself begins "like rising stairs (ἐπαναβασμοῖς)" (Symp. 211 c). Plotinus similarly described "rungs of the ladder (ἐπιβάσεις)" in the *Enneads* to endorse a purification process for reaching the Intellect and the One (Ennead 6 (38) § 6.7.36: 9–10). The word ἐπιβάσεις for 'ladder', which both Plato and Plotinus regularly used, is formed from the root word βαίνω, which (when prefixed with ἐπι for 'over') is commensurate with the notion of mounting, stepping up, etc. [Diggle et al. 2021, 267–268]. The ascending ladder theme is explicit in the writings of the highly obscure sixth to seventh-century Christian monk John Climacus, otherwise known as 'John of the Ladder'. John composed the ascetic text *The Ladder of Divine Ascent,* depicting thirty steps towards reaching Christ, with 'thirty' representing Jesus' age at the time of his crucifixion. Moreover, the thirtieth step or the peak of the ascent, is only reached after transitioning to the "Contemplative Life", in stillness, prayer, dispassion and love, indubitable Platonic connotations that are hard to ignore [Climacus 1982, 12–13]. As Chryssavgis showed, John's ascetic text is saturated with Platonic themes, such as the 'meditation on death' and the tripartite division of the soul into *pathos* (πάθος), *thymos* (θῡμός) and *logos* (λόγος), explicit references to the *Phaedo* (67 e) including other Christian sources [Chryssavgis 2004, 33–34]. John's *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is then portrayed in the twelfth-century Christian icon *Ladder of Divine Ascent* at Saint Catherine's Monastery in Egypt (Fig. 1.), demonstrative of Eastern Orthodox iconography's rendition of its Neoplatonic heritage. This Christian artistic presentation of an ascending ladder includes another miniature iconographic illustration in the Rus translation, which Nikodim Kondakov considered the potential "source of the Novgorod Sophia iconography" [Kriza 2022, 51]. This miniature icon portrays the final thirtieth step of John's ladder mentioned earlier (Fig. 2.).

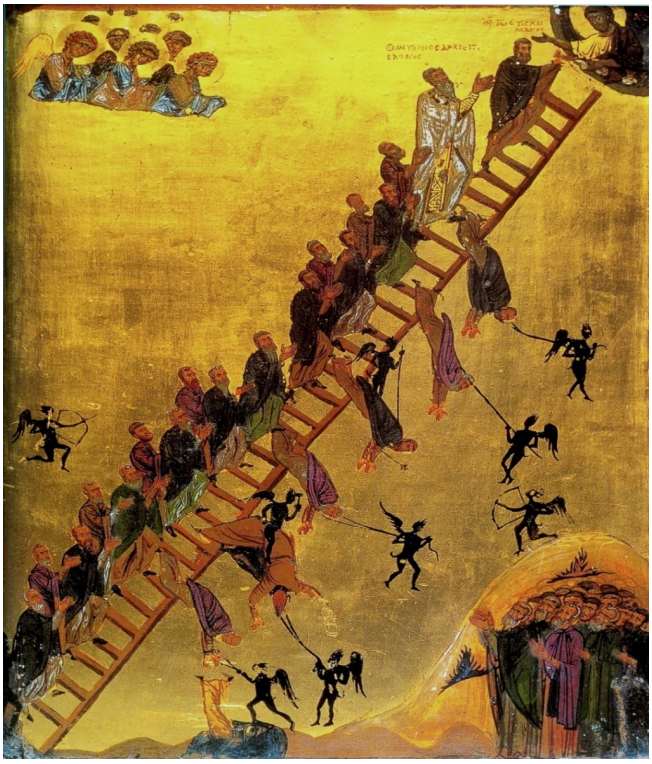

Fig. 1. Ladder of Divine Ascent.
Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, 12th Century

Fig. 2. Faith, Hope, and Love.
Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, 12th Century

Fig. 3. St. Sophia the Wisdom of God.
Veliky Novgorod, St Sophia Cathedral, 15th Century

This is not restricted to iconography, as numerous collections of *scholia* and commentaries on both the treatise and icon are available in Russian and Serbian, among other languages [Chryssavgis 2004, 235–238]. In Russian Orthodoxy, John's ladder is iconographically depicted in the *St. Sophia the Wisdom of God* icon, which dates back to the construction of the Kiev Sophia Cathedral during the eleventh century, where "concepts of humility, virginity, deification, the resemblance to the Theotokos, love, and salvation appear in an ecclesiological framework in both The Ladder of John and the Sophia commentary" [Kriza 2022, 2–3, 50–51]. Visually, obedience and humble wisdom are portrayed by John's presence in the icon above at the Novgorod Sophia Cathedral (Fig. 3.) with his right hand elevated to his chest [Kriza 2022, 2–3, 50–51]. As Kriza elucidates, such abstract visual representations within the Novgorod churches were "inspired by Neoplatonism and its concept of *empsychos graphe*" [Kriza 2022, 175]. While Orthodox iconographical illustrations of the ladder were prominent, the Neoplatonist themes are authoritative in Orthodox writings, particularly in the *Philokalia* (φιλοκαλία, "love of beauty"), the etymological result of conjoining love (φιλία) with beauty (κάλλος) into another evident Platonic expression; an expansive collection of ascetic and mystical texts that were composed between the fourth and fifteenth century AD by some thirty-six writers [Ware 2012, 24][5]. The *Philokalia* has proven vital for Russian

[5] The *Philokalia* was compiled and subsequently published in 1792 in Venice by the Greek monks St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain of Athas (1749–1809) and St. Makarios of Corinth (1731–1805). As the English translators of the first volume write on the back cover: "*The Philokalia* has exercised an influence far greater than that of any book other than the Bible in the recent history of the Orthodox Church" [Palmer et al. 1979, 12].

Orthodox asceticism, with translations from the original Greek into Church Slavonic (1753 translation by Orthodox monk Paisius Velichovsky) and Russian (1857 translation by renowned Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov) being the first recorded [McGuckin 2012, 61–79]. John's text specifically was disseminated in the Athonite translation in Novgorod during the fourteenth century through *The Fountain of Wisdom*, among other texts [Kriza 2022, 46–47]. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the *Philokalia* at length, although it is important to show however briefly, that the collection is a principal demonstration of Neoplatonism percolating through Orthodox Christianity.

To expand in a few words, the *Philokalia* firstly retains the Intellect's meaning in its Plotinian original as the organ of contemplation [Coates 2013, 685]. For the authors of the *Philokalia*, the Intellect, following purification, is for apprehending God [Coates 2013, 685]. As with John's promulgation of Plato's tripartite theory of the soul, other authors, such as Clement and Origen, had furthered Platonic speculation in the ontological and moral aspects of the passions in a Christian context, while others, such as the Cappadocians, transformed the Platonic *eros* into Christian virtues [Blowers 2012, 300–305]. In the recent English translation of the fifth volume, the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, and courage) of Plato's *Republic* (Rep. 427 e, 435 b) are visibly integrated into the tripartite soul, resulting in a uniquely Christian determination of the soul (Philokalia V, 228–229 f). Essentially, the Platonic influence on the *Philokalia* allowed for identifying a "self-reflective awareness of thought processes which will lead to greater understanding of how to identify aberrant patterns of thought and develop healthy ones" [Cook 2012, 324–326]. Admittedly, however, the underlying theme of the *Philokalia* is the ascension process depicted in Orthodox iconography, albeit projected from out of the Neoplatonic foundation. Fundamental oppositions between higher/lower, inner/outer, and abstract/whole all demonstrate elements of *Philokalia's* spirituality and their eventual dissipation in the "Platonic ascent of the mind to God" [Coates 2013, 692–693].

In conclusion, Russian Orthodox iconography and the closely related *Philokalia* owe the development of their theological presentation to Neoplatonism. There are certainly more implicit links to Neoplatonism that would require further research to uncover, but there are also unmistakable themes. Ascension, beauty, and spiritual faith are such pronounced examples. The *Philokalia* is a decisive case in point, as its presence on the periphery of Western Christianity is starkly different from its almost gospel-like importance for Russian Orthodoxy. Acting as an instructive manual for Orthodox asceticism, it also allows the *Philokalia* to reveal much about the spirituality of the Orthodox tradition, one deeply embedded with Iamblichean and Plotinian, among other Neoplatonic elements. When gazing upon these majestic icons with the *Philokalia* in mind, the consonance is almost palpable, reminding one of Florensky's overwhelming beauty. One can almost imagine the authors of the *Philokalia* having composed the texts with the visual theology of the icon in mind, or perhaps the obverse is also true; the icon painters sought inspiration from the ascetic texts of the *Philokalia*. It is clear, nonetheless, that for the faithful Christian, the beauty of the icon is to be supplemented with the theological scaffold of the *Philokalia* for ascending toward union with God. This union is based on the Christian and Neoplatonic belief in the icon's ability to lead one by its emanating beauty towards the divine Beauty of God.

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Information about the author
Emile Alexandrov
PhD student at the School of Philosophy and Theology
University of Notre Dame
23, High St., Fremantle, WA 6160, Australia
Assistant Professor at the School of Advanced Studies
University of Tyumen
2/1, 8 Marta ul., Tyumen, 625000, Russian Federation
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5327-4810
e-mail: e.aleksandrov@utmn.ru

Информация об авторе
Эмиль Александров
докторант Школы философии и теологии
Университет Нотр-Дам
Australia, WA 6160, Fremantle, High St., 23
Доцент Школы перспективных исследований
Тюменский университет
Российская Федерация, 625000, Тюмень, ул. 8 Марта, 2/1
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5327-4810
e-mail: e.aleksandrov@utmn.ru

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