

# ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

## FORM AND MEANING IN ORTHODOX ARCHITECTURE

ANDREW GOULD

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS TODAY RIGHTLY desire the architectural richness of the Byzantine Tradition – to have churches which express the same theology and beauty as the medieval churches of the East. And yet, we are far sundered from that tradition. With regard to doctrine and liturgy, the Orthodox faith has migrated to our shores intact. But with regard to art, the ancient tradition was largely broken. In the Middle East, Byzantine architecture was virtually outlawed under Islamic rule. In Russia, the medieval traditions have, for centuries, been strangled by an infatuation with Western humanism.

If we, as American Orthodox, are to participate in the rebirth of Orthodox architecture, we must begin by understanding why ancient churches were built as they were. We must come to terms with a cultural context so distant from ours that it is difficult for us to comprehend the forces which shaped those churches and the meanings they contain. We must learn that Orthodox architecture is more than a support for iconography, more than a building with a painted dome. In an ancient church, nothing was purposeless or unconsidered. Every wall, every window, every hanging lamp, contributed to the symbolism of the whole. And the symbolism was not limited to theology, for ancient churches, like all ancient temples, were icons of the entire universe, microcosms built in accordance with the geometry and beauty of the heavens and the earth. In this article I will attempt to shed light on the Christian theology and pre-Christian cosmology that are the motivation behind traditional Orthodox architecture.

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## ‘GOD DWELLS THERE AMONG MEN’

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**I**N 988, EMISSARIES of Prince Vladimir of Kiev visited Hagia Sophia. They famously remarked, “Only this we know, that God dwells there among men.” This statement highlights the attitude towards holy temples that was universal among ancient religions – that a god actually lived in the temple. Christianity has moved away from this belief, but Orthodoxy retains it as a liturgical concept. In an Orthodox church, Christ and the saints are present among the faithful. Prayers are directed towards their icons, not towards the sky.

*Monastery of Hosios Loukas,  
situated on the slopes of Mount  
Helikon, Greece. The Katholikon  
dates to the early 11th century.*



This is a great difference from Western architecture. A Gothic church is a monument offered up to God. It is an attempt by man to order and beautify all that exists in creation. It points upward to God the Father who is outside of it, and prayers are directed likewise. In contrast, an Orthodox church is introverted. The interior represents heaven, and to enter it is to step into the New Jerusalem. God dwells there among men, and they have no need of the sun, neither of the moon, for the Glory of God illumines it (cf. Revelation 21:23).

Light pours into a Gothic church through great decorated windows. Broken into dazzling colors, it overwhelms the materiality of the walls. The stonework itself magnifies the effect, as it is thin and delicate, and carved with most delicate tracery. The weight of the stone is denied. The worshipper is at once conscious of the awesome radiance and power of the light without and the tenuous structure of the material within. The light beautifies the structure by dematerializing it, even until the stone itself looks like rays of light.

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The walls of an Orthodox church are immensely thick and strong. The windows are small and up high, set deeply into the openings. The light is seen reflected off the thickness of the wall, rather than directly from the windows. In some Byzantine churches the window is translucent alabaster or marble, so that the light seems to glow from within the wall itself. Gold mosaics or bright frescoes play the light from many surfaces. Polished lamps and inlaid furniture reflect highlights from every direction. Deep aisles or side chapels behind arches appear as mysterious shadows in the distance, which make the church look brighter by the rich contrast. This is mass transfigured by light. It is the same light as in the icons, holy and all-pervading, the Uncreated Light which emanates from God to His creation. The stone and plaster glow from within. They do not seem transitory, but more real. Walls and piers seem as silent and as still as ancient mountains. They are bathed with the Light of Christ, and are sustained and strengthened by it as we are.

I suggest that these qualities of light and mass are the foundation of Orthodox architecture. They are the only qualities which are universal among the myriad forms and styles of Orthodox churches of old. Even a humble village chapel, domeless and unfrescoed, had massive, thick walls, windows up high, and gilded icons to reflect their light. Even wooden churches were massive, as they were invariably built of logs, with multiple chambers and small doors lending to the warm light a quality of mystery and depth.

*Monastery of the Meeting  
of the Vladimir Icon of God, Moscow,  
16th and 17th centuries.*





## THE TEMPLE AS THEOLOGY

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**A** CHURCH BUILDING IS the structure and organization of all the icons within it. As a unified edifice, these make up a single integrated icon which encompasses all the history and theology of the Church. The organization of the icons broadly follows three architectural axes.

The first axis is west to east. This is the liturgical axis. The narthex represents the fallen world, and is used for preparation and exorcisms, for judgment is at the gates of heaven. The nave represents the redeemed world, or the Church, where the faithful gather among the saints for the worship of God. The sanctuary represents highest heaven; the altar is the throne of God and His tomb. The iconography follows this pattern. The Last Judgment and martyrs are to the west, while the seraphim attend at the throne to the east. It is this axis that explains the iconostasis. In early churches there was a low barrier to demarcate the sanctuary, to separate it and make it holy. But as iconography took ever greater precedence in Orthodox architecture, the screen became a uniquely liturgical icon, visually opaque – because eyes cannot penetrate to the Divine Essence beyond – but spiritually transparent – because through communion in Christ we are with God. The iconostasis emphasizes that we can see God only by seeing the Son. The priest passes through the iconostasis, through the veil which separates our worlds, and returns from the altar with the consecrated Gifts from God, that not only our souls, but also our bodies, may commune.

*The Cathedral of the  
Transfiguration of the Savior  
at Mirozh Monastery, Pskov,  
12th century.*



The second axis is vertical and can be understood as hierarchical. The Pantocrator is at the top of the dome with hands outspread, embracing the universe He created. Below are angels in their appropriate ranks, followed

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by the evangelists, representing the beginning of the church, and then the saints in their tiers below. To the medieval mind, hierarchy meant freedom; it was the mark of identity and security. This axis and hierarchy exist also in the iconostasis as a miniature version of the same concept. The vertical axis has another interpretation which is the approach of God and man. The dome, most brightly lit and filled with angels, is heaven. It touches the nave at the pendentives, where the evangelists are painted, because they record the meeting of God and man. Alternately, some churches have four great feasts which are theophanies at the pendentives, for the same reason. The Theotokos of the Sign in the apse represents the Church reaching back up to God. Christ appears in the sign before her, emphasizing that by the Incarnation He is already with her.

The third axis is circular and horizontal, the interplay of icons cycling around the nave and relating to one another across it. This axis often portrays the flow of time, although it can express many other relationships as well. The great feasts may be ordered chronologically around the nave, or specific feasts may be combined or face one another to highlight theological connections. In a large church there may be hundreds of biblical and historical scenes, and their placement with respect to one another and to the principal feasts can suggest almost limitless depths of interpretation.

Historically, church builders have struggled with the interplay of these three axes. The early churches, modeled on Roman civic architecture, were either basilicas or rotundas. The Constantinian basilica had only a strong west-east axis, which gave great emphasis to the altar, but limited the possibilities for iconographic structure, as there was only one axis along which to organize the subjects. It was most successful with a very simple iconographic concept, such as a procession of saints. The rotunda, with its vertical and circular axes was conducive to complex iconography, but not to liturgy. It lacked focus on the altar. Byzantine architecture developed ways of incorporating all three axes. Most Byzantine churches are a combination of basilica and domed rotunda. Eventually, Byzantine church builders settled upon the four-columned plan as the richest solution. In such a church all three axes are equally strong and coherent, and there are numerous interplaying surfaces on which to organize icons. The Russian church adopted this plan exclusively, and achieved iconographic schemes of extraordinary complexity and multiplicity of meaning.

## THE TEMPLE AS COSMOLOGY

**O**F OLD IT WAS A UNIVERSAL BELIEF that a sacred temple should be a microcosm, an icon of the structure of the universe. In an ancient temple, the various forms, colors, and names of the architectural elements associated them with the earth, the sky, the plan-

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*Hagia Sophia,  
Istanbul, 532–537*

etary spheres, the sun gates, and whatever other features were believed to structure the cosmos. Such architecture had not died out in Roman times. Roman temples continued to use ancient and universal forms as micro-cosms – pools of water or mosaics of dolphins to represent the sea, domes painted with stars to represent the heavens, the cardinal directions to symbolize authority over the earth. The Byzantine builders inherited this understanding of architectural forms, and used it to express Christian cosmology.

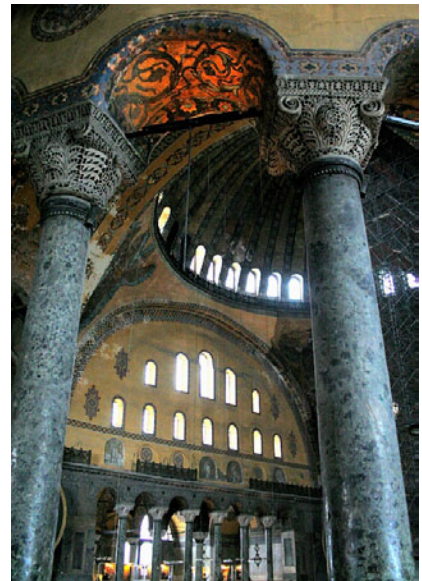
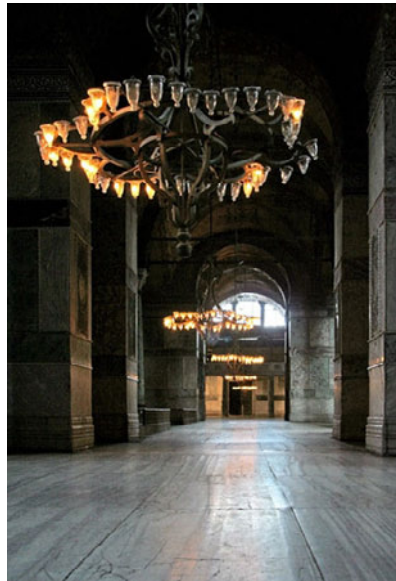


Of all forms, the cube and the dome are the most sacred and universal in architecture. The cube or square represents the earth, while the dome symbolizes the sky. It was ever the desire of the Romans to combine these forms and represent the universe. They achieved this at Hagia Sophia. The square nave has the most water-like pavement in the world. Sheets of wavy blue-gray marble flow from the altar like the river of the water of life from the throne of God. Rows of columns rise from the banks like trees. Amazingly, the builders abandoned the thousand-year-old tradition of the Classical orders, and crafted a new type of capital which looks like the fronds of palms blowing in the wind. The arches above the capitals are decorated similarly. The whole nave is like a walled garden of unimaginable scale, the very image of paradise. The walls are paneled up to the springing of the vaults with most precious marbles. This revetment is the many-tiered gemstone foundation of the New Jerusalem. Above this, the surfaces are gold mosaic, curved and infinite, bearing icons of immense seraphim. Crowning everything is the dome, whence hundreds of gold stars shine from an azure sky.



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*Floor and columns,  
Hagia Sophia.*



As the might of Byzantium dwindled, builders developed ever-richer combinations of forms in the small churches of the Middle Ages. They added a third form to the ancient canon – the cross. The four-columned church, also known as cross-in-square, is the perfect marriage of cosmology and theology. The nave is square, and, in fact, is usually a perfect cube up to the peaks of the arches. Four columns rise from the nave, dividing the space into a cross, and supporting the dome. Thus it is the cross which allows heaven and earth to meet.

To fully appreciate the extent of this microcosm, it is necessary to visualize a Byzantine church fully decorated as in ancient times. The iconography has already been described, but can now be better understood. The Pantocrator reigns from the heavenly dome. The drum, structurally supporting the dome, symbolically reaches down from it. It is pierced with windows, and the powerful column of light that falls from it represents the Uncreated Light coming down from God. The drum is also decorated with angels, the messengers sent down from heaven. Where the drum meets the cross are the pendentives where the evangelists record the marriage. Also from this point hangs the choros, the great circular chandelier which hangs not from the dome but from a ring of chains at the base of the drum. This is the wedding crown, and its appearance is triumphant and joyful beyond words, unimaginable to those who have never seen one. The choros is joined by hundreds of other hanging lamps, which all hang at the same plane, just above the heads of the worshippers. This is the starry sphere, created and near to earth, far below the heavenly abode of God. On Pascha night, such a church is ablaze with the light of a thousand stars, which only faintly suggest the outline of Christ high above. Not until the morning is the Resurrection

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discovered when the brilliant ray of Divine Light falls from the dome, overwhelming the earthly lamps.

A word must be said here of the exterior of an Orthodox church. Byzantine churches were generally massive and plain on the exterior, with only a little decoration in the brickwork. Russian builders, however, developed a symbolic expression for the exteriors. In particular, the cube form is strongly emphasized. The medieval Russians had no precious marbles with which to adorn it, but they plastered the body of the church so that it reflected the sun, becoming a bright and crystalline cube, many-towered and gilded like the Heavenly City.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the Russians adopted the onion dome, which quickly became so popular that it replaced the Byzantine dome on nearly all earlier churches. The onion dome is sometimes said to represent the prayers of the faithful ascending to heaven, but this westernized explanation is really not consistent with the Orthodox idea of heaven being within the church. A better interpretation is that the onion domes are tongues of fire representing holiness within, the mark of the Holy Spirit having descended upon the church. Even the rooflines under the domes often have flame-like shapes, which some say resemble clusters of angel wings, the heavenly host about the throne of God. Indeed, when possible, the Russians gild the onion domes, and, for important churches, the entire roof. When seen from a distance illumined by the bright white northern sun, such churches appear aflame and alive with the holy fire, a sparkling light just as awesome and divine as the uncreated glow within.

*Holy Trinity Cathedral,  
Sergiyev Posad, 1422.*





## THE GLORY THAT WAS ROME

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**O**F ALL MEANINGS, SYMBOLS AND ASSOCIATIONS, I believe one was present before all others in the minds of the ancient church builders – an association nearly lost to the modern Christian. This is the glory that was Rome. Byzantine society ever lamented the slow defeat of Rome; not just her power, but her beauty and richness, the awesome catholicity of her art. Rome was the image of universal authority. Her columns, marbles, and gilding, her mosaics and frescoes, her silver lamps and vessels, her precious silk robes – these were the richest and noblest arts that existed in all the corners of the world, and Rome gathered them unto herself for her adornment. Ever since, the glory that was Rome has stood as the icon of authority and universality. Not only in Byzantium, but in Carolingian Gaul, Germany when it was called Holy and Roman, Napoleonic Europe, and countless other times, the art of Rome has been revived to symbolize universal authority once more.

The Church was born into Rome, and even as she watched Rome's power fade, the Christians took up Roman art as the adornment of their new Authority. An Orthodox church is the New Jerusalem, the bride of the King of kings, universal beyond compare. All the glory once bestowed upon Rome is worthy for her vesture. All the riches of a Byzantine church – the marble revetment, the mosaic vaults, the shining lamps, the eternal frescoes – these were the riches of Rome. Well were the builders aware of it, who, for a thousand years, could still watch the emperors hold court in their ancient palace. They wore sacred vestments and walked on mosaic floors. Such pomp was illumined by alabaster windows. It was written into history on frescoed walls. There was no difference in style and art between the emperor's palaces and the Church's temples.

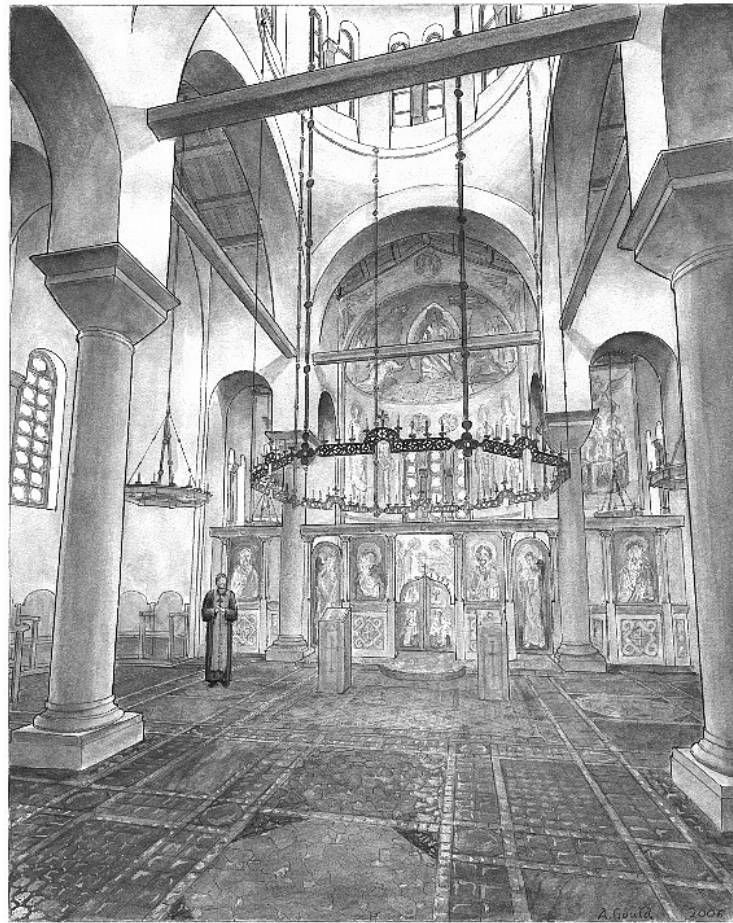
*Dečani Monastery,  
Kosovo, 1327–1335.*



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It is often said that it was no accident that Christ was born into the *Pax Romana*. The culture and politics of Rome facilitated Christianity's growth. The same ought to be said of Rome's art. It was universal, encompassing the best of all the world's cultures and resources. It was eternal, massive and permanent. It was noble, making use of all that is rich and precious to flatter the formality of her rule. It was democratic, available to all Romans in public edifices, and in their homes according to the measure they could afford. No other art could so well adorn Christ's church. No other art could so accurately represent the Heavenly City. Indeed, the very form of the New Jerusalem, as Saint John saw in his revelation, is that of a Roman city. Square with many gates, the walls adorned with tiers of precious stones, her streets flowing with water, her trees bearing good fruit – this is the image and aspiration which Rome prefigured: "And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honor into it" (Revelation 21:24).

*Proposed design for  
Saints Joseph and Andrew  
Orthodox Church,  
Candler, North Carolina.  
Andrew Gould, Designer.*



If we, as American Orthodox Christians, are to partake of the depth and richness of the Church's architectural tradition, we must come to understand these origins and meanings. We must see things as they once were seen, because modern sight is blinded. We must relearn that mass

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*Apse mosaic of the  
Theotokos, Hagia Sophia.*



and strength are godly, that mysterious light is holy. We must see icons as theology, our vision of Christ and the saints, whom we must desire to see stand once again in their heavenly order. We must feel architecture to be more than structure. Its geometries represent the highest truths, and cannot be built casually or without dignity. And we must be mindful of Rome, for Rome showed us the beauty of divine authority. To forget this beauty is to lose sight of the Heavenly Kingdom. Above all we must learn to desire beauty. 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.

In 867, at the end of Iconoclasm, Patriarch Photius gave a sermon in honor of the completion of the mosaic of the Theotokos in the apse of Hagia Sophia. His words, though they seem sublime beyond compare, are yet typical of how the Byzantines spoke of their own churches. We have much to learn from their perspective:

If one called this day the beginning day of Orthodoxy (lest I say something excessive), one would not be far wrong. For though the time is short since the pride of the iconoclastic heresy has been reduced to ashes, and true religion has spread its light to the ends of the world, fired like a beacon by imperial and divine command, this too is our ornament; for it is the achievement of the same God-loving reign. And so, as the eye of the universe, this celebrated and sacred church looked sad with its visual mysteries scraped off, as it were (for it had not yet received the privilege of pictorial restoration), the countenance of Orthodoxy appeared gloomy. Now, casting off this sadness also, and beautifying herself with all her own conspicuous ornaments, and displaying her rich dowry, gladly and joyously she hearkens to the Bridegroom's voice, Who cries out saying, "All fair is my companion, and there is no spot in her. Fair is my companion." For, having mingled the bloom of colors with religious truth, and by means of both having in holy manner fashioned unto herself a holy beauty, and bearing, so to speak, a complete and perfect image of piety, she is seen not only to be fair in beauty surpassing the sons of men, but elevated to an inexpressible fairness of dignity beyond any comparison beside. All fair is my companion. 🍷